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The Dean's Daughter

BY

SOPHIE F. F. VEITCH,

AUTHOR OF "ANGUS GRÆME," "JAMES HEPBURN," ETC.

TORONTO:

THE NATIONAL PUBLISHING COMPANY.

Entered according to Act of Parliament of Canada, in the year one
thousand eight hundred and eighty-nine, by THE NATIONAL
PUBLISHING COMPANY, in the Office of the Minister
of Agriculture.

THE DEAN'S DAUGHTER.

CHAPTER I.

A BORN BOHEMIAN.

'O H, mamma, Flash ran over a pig, and he never fell down. Wasn't it clever of him ?'

My mother was seated in the drawingroom, in company with Miss Lambert, my governess. She turned her beautiful brown eyes upon me with a faintly inquiring glance—they were generally very innocent of any expression.

'My dear Vera,' she said. 'What do you mean ?'

'Just what I say. Flash bolted—he was very fresh to-day, he bolted three times—and a nasty great ugly black pig got in the way, and Flash rolled him over in the road. I've heard papa say a pig getting in the way is nearly certain to throw a horse down, and Flash never fell down a bit, so he must be very clever.'

'Do you not think, Veronica,' put in Miss Lambert—She always called me Veronica when she wished to be impressive,—'that it would show more humanity on your part if you thought less about Flash's cleverness, and more about the unfortunate pig ? Do you suppose the poor animal has no feeling ?'

'No, I am sure he has no feelings, hideous old brute, or he would never have got in the way as he did. Why if Flash had come down on that road he would have cut his poor knees frightfully.'

Those were not the days of afternoon tea, but my mother

always had coffee in the afternoon. Cumming, the butler, was standing with his back to us, arranging the coffee table. I heard a strange sound from his direction, and I think Miss Lambert must have heard it also, for I saw she grew very red. She answered sharply.

'I said "feeling," Veronica, not "feelings." There is a difference. The poor pig must certainly have been much hurt. I think it most inhuman of you not to have stopped to see how much it was injured.'

'If you were on Flash when he bolts—but then you wouldn't be, for you'd tumble off,' I added, parenthetically, and I fear contemptuously. Cumming disappeared with marvellous celerity—'But I mean, you know, if you could sit on him, you would find it is not so easy to stop. I did go back when I managed to pull him up, but the pig was gone, and I hope that he was hurt and that he will be stiff and sore for a long time to come. It will teach him not to get in the way again.'

'My dear Vera,' put in my mother, 'all this talk about Flash and a pig is not very interesting. You had better go up stairs and see if your tea is ready. Good gracious, child, why is your hair tied up in that ugly lump behind? What can Waters be thinking of!'

'It isn't Waters, mamma, it's Jackson. He told Waters he should speak to papa, if I went out riding with long plaits hanging down my back. Flash would scramble through a hedge the other day, and my hair nearly got caught. Jackson said I might almost get scalped. You would not like to see me come home some day all scalped and bleeding.'

'Heavens, child, you are unendurable; go away up stairs directly. Give me a cup of coffee, Miss Lambert, if you please.'

In no way abashed by this rebuff I made for the conservatory, into which the drawingroom opened. The gardeners' entrance was from a stone passage leading to the servants' department and the back staircase, and that was the shortest way to my nursery. Pausing for a moment to look at a plant in the conservatory, I heard my mother say—

'Really, Miss Lambert, I wish you could do something with that child. She is insufferable!'

'My dear Mrs. Dormer,' responded Miss Lambert, 'I am in despair. I never had such a pupil. She is a born Bohemian.'

A Bohemian! What did that mean? I waited to hear more, quite undisturbed by any scruples about eavesdropping. I was but nine years old, and Miss Lambert's automatic administration of religious instruction had not greatly aided my moral development. I do not think it would have crossed my thoughts to listen to a conversation which in no way concerned me personally, but discussions about myself were quite another thing. They generally portended a lecture of some sort from Miss Lambert, were in fact a sort of full-dress rehearsal, my unsuspected attendance at which had more than once enabled me to prepare my defences so as to rout the enemy with ease and rapidity. Besides, my curiosity was much excited by that word 'Bohemian.' and its application to myself, I wanted to hear more about it.

'It is most extraordinary,' I heard my mother say; I cannot think where she can have learned it.'

'She has not learned it,' replied Miss Lambert, with a slightly fretful intonation, as though her unvarying precision was irritated by my mother's irrelevance of thought, 'she is a born Bohemian. I never was so puzzled how to manage a child. It seems absolutely impossible to instil into her any perception of the proprieties of life. She said the other day that Mrs. Charles Mitchell was a lying hypocrite, because of her conduct to old Mrs. Mitchell, and when I reproved her for using such expressions, she said it was quite true, and everybody knew it, so where was the use of pretending not to know or believe it.'

'Yes,' replied my mother, placidly, 'that is just what she would say. She is very truthful, I must allow. I suppose she will outgrow all this sort of thing, so it is no use worrying about it.' My mother was generally quick to seize upon a conclusion which justified a policy of taking no trouble, and leaving things alone—about the only sort of quickness she ever did manifest.

'I do not feel sure about that,' Miss Lambert said, 'if she is

not put under much stricter rules ; and really, if she grows up as she is, I do not see how you are ever to take her into society. I do think, Mrs. Dormer, this riding about by herself should be stopped. It encourages these wild gipsy habits.'

This was growing serious. From the first moment of Miss Lambert's arrival at the Deanery, a year since, I had regarded her with sentiments of hostility, not unmixed with both suspicion and contempt. If she was going to interfere with my liberty—I listened eagerly for the answer. When it came, I detected by the sound my mother was speaking through a yawn, and I breathed more freely. I did not think people generally yawned when they were much in earnest.

' You must talk to the Dean about that,' she said, ' but I do not think you will get him to interfere. He has a theory that girls who ride should know how to manage their own horses, and that they learn best by going about alone. He tells me the way Vera can manage that pony is quite extraordinary. It will come expensive though, if she takes to running over pigs, for I suppose we shall have to pay for them. Do you know the price of a pig, Miss Lambert ? '

' No, indeed, I cannot help you there,' replied Miss Lambert, in a deeply offended tone, which was quite lost upon my mother.

' I suppose they can't be very dear, or the poor people couldn't afford to buy them. Be kind enough to ring the bell, Miss Lambert. I think Murray shall bring my bonnet and cloak, and I will walk as far as the Court before dinner.'

Much reassured I made my way up to the nursery, where my nurse, Mrs. Waters, was seated, mending some fine old lace of my mother's.

' Waters,' I promptly demanded, ' what is a Bohemian ? '

' A Bohemian, my dear ? Why a native of the country called Bohemia.'

' But I'm not a native of it.'

' Certainly not. You were born here, in the Deanery.'

' Then that isn't it. I heard Miss Lambert tell mamma I was a born Bohemian.'

'You must have mistaken the word, my dear.'

'No, I didn't. I heard it quite distinctly, and it has something to do with my calling Mrs. Charles Mitchell a lying hypocrite.'

'Miss Vera, how ever came you to do such a thing as that?'

'Oh, I said it just to shock Miss Lambert, she's always so prim and proper. But it's quite true. I heard mamma and Mrs. Cranley talking about it, and I've heard other people talk about it. I often hear things when they think I'm not listening. She does hate old Mrs. Mitchell, and yet she pretends to be very fond of her, for fear she should leave her money away to some one else, so she is a lying hypocrite.'

'But it isn't kind to say it, my dear.'

'It isn't unkind. She doesn't hear me, so it doesn't hurt her, and everyone knows it, so it isn't telling tales. I wish I knew though what it has to do with being a Bohemian.'

'Come and have your tea, and don't think any more about it. You can have your tea first, and then change your habit.'

The first injunction I obeyed, but not the second. My mind was much taken up with that mysterious epithet, and its apparent connection with two such wholly different phases of conduct as my remarks on Mrs. Charles Mitchell, and my riding Flash. After tea I betook myself to the garden to reflect upon the subject undisturbed.

The Deanery grounds were very beautiful. The Cathedral and Chapter buildings quite shut out all sight or sound of the town, so the Deanery might have been an isolated country house. A very extensive undulating lawn, on which grew some magnificent old trees, was only divided by a sunk fence from a piece of park-like ground sloping down to the deep, swift, clear river running at about a quarter of a mile's distance from the house. Beyond the river, sloping upwards again, was the beautifully-timbered park of Wichenborough Court, a fine old country house, partially visible in the distance. The Deanery grounds had been skilfully laid out, and were kept in most perfect order, far too perfect for me, even when I ran no risk, as I did at that moment, of meeting my mother. I was not

partial to her society. I think I regarded her as a piece of quite unobjectionable but by no means interesting household furniture.

My favourite haunt was a piece of ground known in Chapter parlance as 'the debatable land,' a plot of about two acres in extent adjoining, and only partially fenced off from the Deanery grounds, respecting which there was some little uncertainty as to whether it was actually a part of the private grounds of the Deanery, or whether it belonged to the Chapter. In times past I believe this uncertainty had given rise to heart-burnings, even to quarrels, upon which it was said local lawyers had thriven amazingly. But this had never been in the days of my liberal, genial-tempered father. What did it matter, he said, whether the ground belonged to him or the Chapter? His gardeners could easily give it all the attention it needed, and it was a fine place for the Chapter babies and nurses, they were out of the way of the soldiers, and there was plenty of shade.

This was my general resort. I could cut sticks, or do anything disorderly, without dread of suddenly encountering the wrathful glare of the head gardener. The time for babies being past, I now betook myself thither to meditate undisturbed. There was, however, a door in the wall which separated the debatable land from the public road, and coming from certain directions the route was a short cut to the Close.

I had not long established myself on a favourite seat when I heard the click of the door latch, followed by footsteps approaching, and shortly there emerged from the shrubs which hid the door from my sight, one of the minor canons, and, to my great satisfaction, one for whom I had a special regard.

'What, Vera,' he said, 'safe home? How many times did Flash bolt to-day?'

'Three times. He was very fresh; but he did not get into the hedge, though it would not have mattered, for Waters had tied my hair up tight. He did pull very hard though. But please sit down, Mr. Charlote, if you are not in a hurry. I want to ask you a question.'

THE DEAN'S DAUGHTER.

'By all means,' he said, seating himself beside me.

'I want to know what a Bohemian is? I don't mean a native of Bohemia, you know, something different.'

He looked rather curiously at me. 'Who said anything to you about Bohemians?' he asked.

'No one. It was something I overheard, but I will tell you just what happened. Then you will understand.'

I was tolerably accurate, and faithfully detailed all that had passed until I came to my candid remarks and Cumming's sudden bolt. Then I discovered that Mr. Charlote was shaking with laughter.

'Why do you laugh?' I abruptly broke off. 'Is it at the pig? I am sure Miss Lambert would not consider that very humane.'

'I was not laughing at the pig, but at the idea of Miss Lambert riding Flash?'

'Why shouldn't she? If he did not run away.'

'Well, Flash is not exactly what is termed a safe and steady mount.'

'Is he very difficult to ride? I was thinking of getting Edith Cranley to change ponies with me some day, and see if she could ride him.'

'My dear Vera, do nothing of the kind! He would pitch her off in two minutes. You and Flash understand each other, but I can tell you I should be very sorry to ride him. But go on with your story. You have not got to the Bohemian part of it yet.'

I finished my recital, and then I saw he looked grave.

'Do you understand what they meant?' I asked.

'Perfectly well. A Bohemian, in the sense in which they used the word, means some one who will do just what he pleases, without attending to any rules of society, or caring what anyone thinks.'

'Well then, for once Miss Lambert is right, for I do always mean to do just what I like, and not care the least what anyone thinks. Aunt Marien is always going on about Edith Cranley,

and asking me why I cannot be a perfect little lady like her. I think Edith is a great baby, and she is a little sneak. She puts on her ladylike manner when it suits her, or she can get anything by it; but she can be rude and disagreeable enough if she likes. I don't want to be like that. I want to be always the same.'

'Quite right. But it is not necessary to be unkind, to avoid being a sneak.'

'But I am not unkind.'

'Not about Mrs. Charles Mitchell?'

'It doesn't hurt her. I don't say it to her.'

He was silent for a moment, looking down thoughtfully. Then he said:

'Do you ever do anything very naughty, Vera?'

'Oh yes, some times. Do you know why my daily governess, Miss Jones, went away?'

'No.'

'Well, I'll tell you,' I replied. 'It was the naughtiest thing I ever did. Miss Jones was a nasty, mean little wretch. She was always prying and poking about, and trying to find out everyone's business. Well, you know my little dog Peter; she didn't like him, and wanted him kept out of the school-room. She said she was shortsighted, and was afraid of treading on him, but it wasn't that. She used to bring a basket, and steal cake and things from the tea table, and Peter went sniffing at it; that was what she didn't like. She wasn't a bit shortsighted. Shall I tell you how I found that out? It was such fun.'

'Yes, tell me.'

'She was always going on about Canon Duncombe in such a silly way—he was the dearest, sweetest, most angelic man. You might have thought he was a sugar doll; and she detested Mr. Stevens. One day, when we were out, I saw Mr. Stevens quite a long way off. I could only just tell that it was him. So I said "Look, Miss Jones, there is Canon Duncombe just going into the Close." She exclaimed directly, "What nonsense, Vera, that

is Mr. Stevens. How can you take that odious man for dear Canon Duncombe?"

'He is so far off,' I said. 'How much your sight must have improved.' She turned quite red, and said I was very impertinent, and she was so sulky. Next day we had the row about Peter, and I am sure she did it out of revenge. She was spiteful. We were just going to have tea, and she took the kettle off the fire to pour some water into the teapot. Peter was lying on the rug, and she pretended to stumble over him, and upset some hot water upon him. It was not very bad, but of course it hurt him very much just for the moment. I had just come in with such a big egg I had found, a hen's egg you know, that I was going to show Waters. I saw quite well she did not really stumble over Peter, that she only pretended, and I was in such a rage I just threw the egg at her as hard as I could, and it hit her on the side of the head. There was such a row. I was sent to my room for the rest of the day, and Miss Jones never came again. Miss Lambert came soon after.

Mr. Charlcote tried not to laugh, but I could see his shoulders shaking. 'You needn't mind laughing,' I said encouragingly. 'I shan't think you approve, if you do. I know it was a horrid thing to do, and I was really very sorry afterwards. I would have told her so if I had seen her again. But I was so angry. I don't think I knew what I had done until I saw the great egg go smash against her head. How she did scream! What between her screaming, and Peter howling, you never heard such a row. They were at tea in the servants' hall, and all the servants came running, and the men did laugh. I overheard Cumming telling Jackson he and Robert were so tired with laughing they could hardly wait properly at dinner afterwards.

'Well,' replied Mr. Charlcote, 'You have just enabled me to show you what I mean about being unkind. If I went and told people you had thrown an egg at Miss Jones, and never said a word about Peter and the hot water, you would think it very unkind?'

'I should think you a horrid sneak,' I promptly replied,

'Exactly. But, really Vera, that is very much what you have been doing, though you do not know it. It is a great pity a child of your age should ever have heard anything about the Mitchells, but as you have heard, I will tell you more. Mrs. Mitchell did not like her son's marriage at all, but Mrs. Charles was supposed to be a great heiress. It turned out all a mistake, and she has no money, so she is always afraid that just because he married her, her husband will be very poor all his life, for old Mrs. Mitchell can leave all her money away if she likes. Mrs. Charles is very fond of her husband and children, and she frets very much about it. I do not say she acts rightly in making false professions of affection for her mother-in-law, but you see how different the case is when you know the whole truth, and how wrong it is to say what she does without saying why she does it.'

I burst into tears. I could not help it. The simple illustration he had used brought home so clearly to me the injustice of which I had been guilty. 'Oh, Mr. Charlote,' I sobbed, 'I am so sorry. I will never say a word about it again. And I will always try and defend Mrs. Charles Mitchell.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'Scylla and Charybdis,' I heard him mutter. 'No, Vera,' he said, 'don't do that. Simply be silent. These are not questions a child of your age can understand. I only want you to feel how wrong it is to judge harshly. But sometimes we almost seem to imply that it is no consequence whether people do right or wrong. Whereas, the truth is, we can never judge, because we never know what the temptation has been. Sometimes the person who has done wrong hardly knows. It would puzzle many people who have committed great crimes to mark the exact spot at which they began to deviate from the right path. We have only to try always to do right ourselves, and though we must never attempt to make out that wrong is right, still never allow ourselves to judge people who do wrong.'

'I will try never to do it again,' I exclaimed vehemently. 'But why couldn't Miss Lambert put it in that way? She only said it was unladylike and improper to use such expressions. I am sure if she is ladylike and proper, I do not want to be. I suppose she

daren't put it like you do because she is constantly saying nasty spiteful things about people herself.'

'You must give her the benefit of the same doubt,' he replied, smiling a little. 'You cannot tell what may have happened to sour her temper.'

At this moment I heard the gong. 'I must go now,' I said. 'Good night, Mr. Charlote. I wish you taught me, instead of Miss Lambert. I don't think I should be a Bohemian then?'

He drew me to him and kissed me. 'Whatever you are, my child,' he said tenderly, 'you will be true metal, no counterfeit. Be loving and true, Vera, and things will come right for you; though I doubt there will be a fiery baptism.'

CHAPTER II.

FLASH TO THE RESCUE.

I NCREDIBLE though the fact may seem, it is none the less an indisputable one, that I, Veronica Dormer, the only child of the Dean of Wichborough, born and reared amidst all the solemn stately surroundings of a rather more than usually aristocratic cathedral establishment, was, at the age of nine years, as thorough-going a Bohemian as it was possible for such a child to be. A good many factors had, I suspect, been at work to bring about that amazing result. Heredity may have played its part, for I have come since to know that my placid imperturbable mother came of an old north country family, whose almost sole occupation for centuries had been raids, successful or not as the case might be, on their neighbours' cattle across the border, and desperate resistance against reprisals. Perchance a dormancy for a few generations of the hereditary tendencies of the race had caused a storage of force, and I was the favoured recipient of the accumulated results. At any rate I am certain, had I been born a man, a few centuries since, I should have been the boldest moss-trooper on all the border side. I am sure that until I was fully

nineteen I never knew what fear was. A sudden momentary start, such as people often term 'a great fright,' I had often known; but never until then did I know what it really was to feel dread sickening terror fix its cold grip upon my very heart, taking from me for ever the reckless hardihood of ignorance, and making courage, in future, the steady reasoned action of practised self-control.

Apart from hereditary influences I have always regarded myself as a sort of incarnate French revolution; not, however, a revolt against oppression and exaction strained to the breaking point, but against repression and extinction of freedom and independence, strained beyond endurance by the demands of society. It is difficult in these days of comparative freedom and gradual effacement of social distinctions to picture clearly, even to oneself, what the life of the so-called upper classes was when I was a child; especially that life as exemplified within the precincts of such a cathedral close as that of Wichenstow.

The Chapter of Wichenstow was not a specially wealthy one, but it had rare attractions for men of a certain stamp, if they chanced to possess fortune enough to render them careless about a few hundreds more or less of income. The neighbourhood was beautiful, the number of good country houses within easy range exceptionally large, the Cathedral itself was magnificent, and the Canons' houses were large, well-built, and commodious. For a man possessed of private fortune, and that sort of refinement which shrinks from the jolting and friction of the working world, and contact with vulgar, common-place troubles and worries, no more charming sojourn in this vale of tears could have been found, or one from which the Christian duty of bearing one another's burden could be inculcated with more perfect certainty of an absolutely unbiassed view of the subject.

These were not days of undisturbed calm in the Church of England. The Liberal movement, the Hampden storm, the Tracts for the Times, had all ruffled, or were ruffling the serene calm of ecclesiastical repose. Of these things I, of course, knew nothing, but I am inclined to think they were only heard of in

Wichborough Close as echoes from afar, and that a comfortable conviction that 'things will last our time,' kept interest in them at a low temperature. I remember sometimes hearing my father indulge in pessimist forebodings when he read the papers, but it seems to me as if it was with an undercurrent of well-satisfied assurance that for so long as it personally concerned him the Deanery would never lack excellent cellars, unimpeachable plate and crystal, well-trained livery servants, a superlative cook and admirably appointed stables. Satisfied on these points, a man can indulge in the most gloomy prognostications without any serious disturbance of either his temper or digestion.

A kindly, courteous, easy-going English gentleman my father was, in every way, and a most popular Dean. He lived in peace with all men, even the Bishop! entertained hospitably, and held always an open purse. I suspect he spent more than his whole official income on objects connected with the Cathedral and Chapter. He preached short sermons in gracefully, scholarly English, and possessed a rich, musical voice and accurate ear, which rendered his intoning, when he took any part in the prayers, a treat to hear. He was always ready to take the chair at meetings in the town, and to subscribe handsomely to local charities. What more, in those days, could have been demanded of a Dean?

My mother always was, and has always remained an insoluble enigma to me. Anything more nearly approaching vegetation than her life I never saw. The daily routine of existence seemed to be in her more an automatic process, than the result of any distinct volition. She was regular in her habits, never, save from illness or accident, missing morning prayers in the Cathedral, or her daily interview with the housekeeper. Then she took up her position in the drawingroom, on a certain sofa, with a small table beside her, on which were the papers, books, and always some piece of fancy work in a sandal-wood work-box, and there she sat till luncheon time. In the afternoon she took a drive, or, perhaps, walked as far as Wichborough Court, or into the Close to call on some Canon's wife, but I do not think in her whole

life she ever set foot in the town, save in getting in and out of her carriage. The only flashes of intelligence I ever observed in her were in the directions of finding reasons for avoiding trouble. Hence I imagine her attitude of blank neutrality towards my utter Bohemianism. Doubt if even the episode of the egg would have roused her to any action, had not Waters taken the rather strong step of demanding an interview with the Dean, and entering an energetic protest.

What sort of religious training I received, at that epoch, in such an establishment, may be pretty well imagined. In due conformity with the instructions of the Church I was, with the utmost regularity, called upon 'to hear sermons,' and duly instructed in 'the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments, in the vulgar tongue, and all other things which a Christian ought to know and believe to his soul's health,' but anything like practical moral training came only from two sources. Waters, my nurse, the daughter of an old retainer of the Dormers, who had made a most unhappy marriage, and found a refuge at the Deanery when I was born, was a woman of deeply religious nature, but whether from natural character, or from the moulding circumstances of life, a horror of selfishness seemed to be her one dominating idea of evil. In her early lessons to me I can remember now how constantly she impressed upon me, that to be selfish was the most odious, to be ready to sacrifice yourself for others the noblest thing in life; a lesson certainly not pervading the general moral atmosphere of the Deanery. The only other moral influence under which I came at all was that of occasional brief conversations, such as that which I have purposely described, somewhat at length, with Mr. Charlote, and which, from their practical nature, made a vivid and lasting impression upon me. I imagine he saw I was honest and straightforward by nature, and had a quick natural insight into shams and conventions, and feared a sort of cynical contemptuous indifference for everything and everybody growing up within me, and my Bohemianism degenerating from healthy, natural independence, into coarse indifference for everyone else's

opinion ; and that hence grew his earnest desire to impress upon me a strong sense of justice, and a broad comprehensive tenderness for those who did wrong, as the victims of temptations, generally unknown to those who readily condemn their shortcomings. The virtues thus inculcated were not undesirable ones at whose shrine to kneel ; but, perhaps, my devotion to them was a little too exclusive.

Such were the circumstances and surroundings of my childhood, and they require to be described at some length if the strange drama of my future career is to be placed in right perspective. An impetuous fearless freedom-loving nature, set in an environment of dull decorous propriety, artificial refinement, and superficial polish, in which the conventional rules of society were of equal importance with the decalogue, if indeed they did not take rank above it ; and with the two-virtues of self-sacrifice, and the charity that thinketh no evil, exalted as objects of worship without any very accurate perception of their exact scope and limits, or of the boundary lines beyond which they would become unwarrantable intruders on the domains of other virtues.

The 'Aunt Marion,' whom I have mentioned, was Mrs. L'Estrange, the wife of Colonel L'Estrange, of Wichborough Court, and my father's sister. She was a few years younger than my father, but whereas he had married rather late in life, she had done so young, and her eldest son, and only surviving child, Conrad L'Estrange, was about eighteen years older than I was. He had been a sad disappointment to his parents, though through no fault of his own. He had early shown promise of great ability ; but the development, almost in childhood, of chronic asthma, had blighted all chance of any distinguished career, and doomed him to the life of a student. Like many asthmatic subjects he had always found himself particularly well in London, and up to the time when most men leave the universities he had carried on his studies at the house of a private tutor in London, an apparently unimportant fact destined to form one of the links in the chain of my future fate. As long as I could remember he had been living at Wichborough Court, generally occupied in

studying, appearing, however, in the hunting field when his health would allow, and showing himself then one of the boldest riders in the field, and taking, occasionally, part in public assemblies, where no great demand on his voice was necessary.

His was a very beautiful disposition, almost childlike in its guileless unworldliness, and boundless generosity, and though his frail health rendered his circle of acquaintance a limited one, he possessed a most extraordinary power of inspiring deep and devoted attachment. Heredity must have been responsible, for he was a marked contrast in character and disposition to both his parents. Aunt Marion was compounded of weakness and obstinacy, vacillation and self-will. In folly, when she seized on a determination, nothing would turn her from her course; in wisdom, nothing would hold her to her course. Wise counsels ran off her like water off a polished surface. She soaked in bad advice like a thirsty sponge. Her powers of action were, however, circumscribed in all directions, for a more cold, hard, unfeeling man than Colonel L'Estrange never existed. I believe he almost hated Conrad for his feeble health. His selfish vanity led him to represent his own inability ever to make the faintest mark upon the world as solely caused by unlucky circumstances, and he had hoped to point to the brilliant career of his gifted son as the result of ability inherited from himself, and developed under more favourable conditions.

There was constant intercourse between Wichborough Court and the Deanery, a light footbridge having been thrown across the river to facilitate communication. It was a charming stroll through the beautiful Deanery grounds and the finely timbered stretch of Wichborough Park, but I went there very little, as a child. I did not care for Aunt Marion, she was fussy and artificial, and much shocked at my gipsy ways. Finding her remonstrances roll back uselessly off the placid indifference of my mother, and the easy carelessness of my father, she delivered her own soul by lecturing me, in season and out of season, when she could catch me, which was consequently seldom. Colonel L'Estrange was a sort of embodied sneer, and not having the

courage to face him, I avoided him. For Conrad I had a strong though timid affection. He was always very kind to me, but he spoke very little, often from sheer inability to do so without painful effort, at other times, probably, from the mere force of the habit thus acquired. I hardly understood then the cause of this silent gravity, therefore in spite of my affection I stood a little in awe of him.

Of companionship I had very little. Canon Cranley was the only one of the canons who had children near my age, and even when they were in residence I did not see very much of them. I do not think Mrs. Cranley cared very much for the acquaintance. Had I carried out that ill-omened design about the ponies, which Mr. Charlote nipped in the bud, I suppose our acquaintance would have come to an abrupt end—had Edith Cranley outlived the experiment, a result about which I am now doubtful—on the not untenable plea that her life was not safe when we were together. Of children outside Close, lay or clerical, I saw almost nothing. The Chapter, in general I imagine, leavened its dealings with the town with too strong a leaven of condescension to be altogether popular, and Miss Jones had doubtless proclaimed far and wide the horrors of the great egg exploit, which probably occasioned careful mothers to rejoice in the ecclesiastical exclusiveness which kept their nurseries and schoolroom free from such dire moral infection. In truth I knew little or nothing of the town. I sometimes went to a shop with Waters, occasionally rode or drove through it, but that was all. The only restriction put upon my solitary excursions upon Flash was that I was never to ride through the town. That order I received from my father himself, in tones which I knew meant that I must obey. I am not sure that I took much account of the moral obligation, but I knew that disobedience meant a total suppression of my rambles, so I took very good care to abide strictly by my orders.

I have sometimes wondered whether the exact nature and extent of the rambles which I and Flash made out together was ever clearly known to the let-well-alone policy which prevailed

at the Deanery. He was a good-sized and immensely strong black pony, very handsome, and very headstrong, but quite free from vice. He won his name from a tendency to make sudden bolts, one of the reasons, I believe, for the town being strictly forbidden, less from fear of collision, for he was sagacious in choosing a clear course for such exploits, than from fear of his feet flying from under him at a crossing. I believe my father had consulted the coachman, an old family servant, whether I was safe, and been assured that there was the most perfect understanding between Flash and me, and that barring the town he might make himself perfectly easy on the subject. Hence, with that one exception, I was wholly unrestricted, save as to time. By dint of stupendous struggles with the Cathedral clock I had learned early to read the time. Then my father gave me a small silver watch to carry with me when I rode alone, and I roamed the country at my will.

The Wichborough Court property was extensive, and included within its bounds the larger part of a very beautiful tract of country, westward from Wichborough, known as Wichborough Chase or the Chase. In many parts the scenery was not unlike that of the New Forest. Here and there, from time to time, a few acres had been enclosed and cultivated, but not, I imagine, with very lucrative results, and the main part still consisted of wide stretches of forest scenery, intermingled with commons thickly covered with gorse and bracken and large patches of copse wood. A more perfect riding ground could not have been imagined, and I believe I was supposed, when out on Flash, to spend my time in cantering over the commons or along the forest glades, and this to a considerable extent I did, but I also did a good deal more. I explored the Chase in all directions, often riding, I imagine, a good many more miles than I was aware. Fortunately for me Flash possessed sound judgment on the question of jumping, and was not to be induced by any arguments to attempt rash exploits. In the matter of scrambling he paid more deference to my wishes, and many a strange feat of that nature we perpetrated separately or in company. With

the exception of Lord Wichborough's huntsman, whips, and keepers, I suspect there were few people better acquainted with the topography of Wichborough Chase than I was by the time I was ten years old.

I must have been near about that age when I first began to be aware that there was something not just as it should be at Wichborough Court. Aunt Marion wholly failed to lecture me when she saw me, or to make disagreeable remarks about my beloved Flash. She seemed, indeed, almost to forget my existence, a personal slight which I found it easy to forgive. She came often to the Deanery, and held long interviews with my father in his study, and I noticed that more than once he spoke of her to my mother as 'poor Marion.' One afternoon, chancing to go suddenly into the drawingroom to ask my mother a question, I found both Aunt Marion and my father there, he looking grave and anxious, she with evident traces of tears on her face, and even my mother manifesting faint traces of animation. I was immediately dismissed, and seizing my garden hat I forthwith sped off at my utmost speed to Wichborough Court. I did not care very much for Aunt Marion, but it seemed to me a very dreadful thing that she should cry.

I made my way straight to my cousin Conrad's study, where, as I expected, I found him reading. I knew it was not the sort of day likely to tempt him to go out. I fancied he also looked rather grave.

'Conrad,' I said, 'is anything the matter?'

'I dare say a great many things are the matter in various parts of the world, Vera,' he replied, with his kindly smile.

'No, but I don't mean that. I mean something here, you know, something that is vexing Aunt Marion.'

He looked keenly at me for a moment. 'What makes you think anything is vexing her my dear?' he asked.

'Because I found her at the Deanery just now, with papa and mamma, in the drawing-room, and I am sure she had been crying.'

'Poor mother,' I heard him mutter under his breath. Then after a moment's silence, he added, 'My father is not very well,

and my mother is anxious about him, more so I hope than she need be, but it worries her a good deal.'

'I am so sorry, I can't bear to see her cry. I wish I could help her. Do you think I could do anything for her, Conrad?'

He drew me to him and kissed my forehead. 'I cannot think of anything you can do for her,' he said.

'She is very fond of ferns,' I went on. 'Do you think it would amuse her if I went and got her some? I know where beautiful ones grow, in the Chase. I could go on Flash and get them. They grow in out-of-the-way-places, where no one ever sees them; such beauties, some of them.'

I saw a sudden change of expression pass over my cousin's face. 'I don't think your aunt would care for the ferns, Vera; but you have given me an idea,' he said. 'You know the Chase well.'

'I know every bit of this side of it. I don't know the Buckton side so well.'

'That is not wanted. I am not sure, if your aunt could trust you, that you might not be very useful to her.'

My heart beat with delight. To be useful to someone who was in trouble—it was the first time such a possibility had dawned upon me.

'What can I do?' I asked.

'You know Mr. Bartlett's house?' Mr. Bartlett was Colonel L'Estrange's agent, and lived in a delightful old manor house on the border of the Chase, at about four miles distant from the Court.

'Yes, I know it.'

'Do you think you could go there on Flash, without going along the road?'

'Quite well,' I replied. 'At least I should only have to go a very little way along the road, just to cross the bridge, and reach the gap in the hedge where the footpath along the river bank comes out. After that I should never need to go near the road?'

'Well, if your aunt was to send you at any time with a note to

Mr. Bartlett, do you think she could trust you to take it without being seen on the road, and not to tell anyone what you had done ?'

'Not even papa and mamma ?'

'Oh, they would know, of course. I mean without telling Miss Lambert, or Waters, or Jackson.'

'As if I ever told Miss Lambert anything !' I replied. 'But I wouldn't say a word to anyone.'

'Then I think it is quite possible you might be very useful to your aunt.'

'Oh, I am so glad ! I—'

The hasty entrance of Aunt Marion herself cut my speech short at this point. 'Oh, Conrad,' she began, then seeing me she stopped abruptly, looking not over well pleased.

'What are doing here, Vera ?' she asked.

'Vera came to me in great distress, mother,' Conrad said, 'because she is sure Aunt Marion is troubled about something, and she wants to know if she cannot help her. I rather think she can.'

'She ?' The tone was most incredulous.

'Yes, with the aid of Flash. Vera will at any time, if you like, take a note from you to Bartlett, without being seen on the road ; and I will undertake for her telling no one save her father and mother, that she has done so.'

'Oh, you dear child !' exclaimed my impulsive aunt, giving me a hearty embrace. 'Nothing could be better.'

'Am I to go now ?' I asked. 'I am afraid Jackson would wonder very much if I asked to have Flash saddled now.'

'Oh no, my dear child. Why it would be quite dark before you got home !'

'That wouldn't matter. Flash would find his way home in the dark ; but the servants would wonder so.'

'Heavens !' said my aunt, 'what an extraordinary child. No, my dear, I don't want you to go now, but it will be a great relief to me to know that you can go.'

I started for home in great spirits, and I am sure I liked Aunt

Marion better from that time forward. None the less the circumstances gave cause for sage reflection, and I seated myself on the low sweeping bough of a fine old ash in the Deanery grounds to meditate at leisure. It was all very well for Aunt Marion to lecture me, and sneer at my Bohemian ways, for she had taken up that expression, but if I had not been a Bohemian who would have been the loser now? Had I been 'a perfect little lady' like Edith Cranley, who would have taken her letter to Mr. Bartlett? I had come across the hounds several times in Wichborough Chase, and I knew quite well that in order to reach Mr. Bartlett's house, I must, in some way, pass places which had stopped the huntsman. Edith Cranley would have begun to cry if asked to scramble through a gap in a hedge. I thought it was not quite fair for Aunt Marion to be always railing at my Bohemian ways, and then be so ready to take advantage of them for her own purposes. I pronounced it rather mean of her; then remembered that I had no right to judge her, and that she was in trouble; repented me of my errors, and rejoiced greatly to think I could help her in any way.

CHAPTER III.

AN ADVENTURE IN THE CHASE.

I DO not propose to write an exhaustive chronicle of my life. A far more eventful one than mine ever was, could only present, if minutely detailed, a somewhat monotonous expanse, varied by an occasional strong situation. The special characteristic of my own life seems to me, as I look back over it, to be that not only the special incidents, but all the general conditions of my earlier years trended towards, and in themselves aided to prepare for the one great climax. Hence, just because they are all links in the chain, I am sometimes obliged to dwell longer on trifling circumstances than their intrinsic importance would seem to warrant.

A very important link in that chain was my undertaking the duty of confidential messenger between Aunt Marion and Mr. Bartlett. I had accepted the post with an eager alacrity, born of my extreme desire to be useful; but in my after reflections on the subject a shadow of misgiving sometimes crossed my mind, as I thought of certain places in the Chase which lay between me and the Manor. But I was not going to be daunted. I would force Aunt Marion to confess that Flash was not a 'horrid brute,' as she had once called him in my presence; an offence which I had never entirely condoned.

I heard nothing more of the project for several days. Then one day at luncheon my father said carelessly :

'Vera, I think you had better take Flash out this afternoon. I was at the stables just now, and I think he will be the better of a run.'

There was nothing extraordinary in this remark, but something in my father's manner made my heart beat. I looked at Miss Lambert. I always felt sure her eyes and ears were open to catch anything not intended for her. She was, however, talking to my mother, who looked placidly neutral as usual.

'Very well, papa,' I said, 'I can go directly after dinner.'

'Send word to the stables,' he said to the footman, 'to have Miss Dormer's pony saddled in half an hour.' Then, as he got up to leave the room, he added, 'Come to my study when you are ready to start, Vera.'

He was sitting at his writing table when I went to him. 'So my little maid,' he said, 'your aunt is minded to make use of the wild riding she objects to so much. She will have to leave off lecturing now, I think. But are you sure you can do it, Vera?'

'Quite sure. But I shall get a long lecture from Waters. I shall come home in a terrible mess.'

'Never mind about that. Here is the note. Try and bring an answer if you can. If Mr. Bartlett should be out you can wait for a little, but do not stay long enough to make you very late in getting home. You must just leave the note if you cannot see him. If you get an answer bring it straight here. If I

am not here, put it in this drawer, which I will leave open, and then close it.'

The drawer I knew closed with a spring, and could only be opened with a key my father always carried about him. I had a very clear perception that some important mission was being intrusted to me, but I do not think it brought me any sense of personal importance. I was only conscious of being trusted, and ardently anxious to show myself worthy of the trust, with perhaps a spice of malicious pleasure in proving the advantages of Bohemianism.

A wild scramble I had that afternoon. My father's knowledge of the Chase was, I imagine, confined to an occasional canter over some of the more open parts of it. I doubt if he had the faintest suspicion of what I had undertaken in promising to reach the Manor without riding along the public road. Fortunately Flash was in an extra heroic mood, and refused to be daunted by any obstacle. These extra heroic moods generally ended in a battle royal, persistence in which was, on both sides, encouraged by memories of former victories, and I looked forward with some satisfaction to the prospect of 'a row of some sort' before we reached home. The row of that afternoon was destined to be a momentous one.

I reached the Manor in safety at last. Mrs. Bartlett, a kindly motherly woman, was seated on the lawn before the house, knitting, and hearing the pony's hoofs, she came forward and opened the gate for me. I explained my errand as she walked beside me up to the door.

'Mr. Bartlett is not in,' she said, 'but he is not far off. Please wait a moment, and I will send some one to take your pony.'

She went into the house as she spoke, and had hardly disappeared when Flash gave a spring which, all unprepared as I was, nearly unseated me. Two wild, ragged-looking gipsy lads had come suddenly round the corner of the house, close to us, apparently from the back door. They immediately began to beg, and I looked at them with some interest. I knew there were often gipsies camping about the Chase, and was in truth very

anxious to come across them. I had, not long before, come up with a pale, sickly-looking gipsy woman, toiling along one of the cross roads, with a heavy bundle, and a child in her arms. I had straightway offered to carry the bundle, hung to the pommel of my saddle, partly because I was sorry for her, partly because I hoped I might get a sight of the camp. She had let me carry it for some distance, but then had insisted on my coming no further, thanking me with a grateful look in her great black eyes, as she struck off along a narrow footpath into the heart of the Chase. I did not like the looks of these two specimens at all, so told them I had nothing for them, and they went sulkily away. Just then Mrs. Bartlett returned, and immediately a man, looking like a farm servant, came round the house.

'If you will come in, Miss Dormer,' Mrs. Bartlett said, 'Joe will take the pony to the stable, and then look for Mr. Bartlett.'

Mr. Bartlett very soon came. He did not seem surprised at my errand, but I thought he looked anxious, and I saw Mrs. Bartlett was watching him closely as he read the note. 'Nothing very special,' he said, catching her eye as he turned to leave the room. He was away some little time, then he returned with a letter in his hand, which was duly consigned to my pocket. As a good deal of time had passed, I asked to have Flash brought round at once.

'You are a youthful messenger to be riding alone across country; Miss Dormer,' he said. 'Mrs. L'Estrange may be very thankful for such an independent little niece.'

'I don't think she is,' I answered, rather ruefully I imagine. 'She is always preaching to me to be a perfect little lady. If I had been, I don't know how she would have got her letters sent. But if ever she calls Flash a "horrid brute" again, I shall tell her it is very mean. I could never have done it but for his being so clever.'

They both laughed. 'No, no,' Mr. Bartlett said, 'she must never say another word against Flash, that is quite clear. Only I am glad you have to ride him, not I.'

At that moment a sound of skirmishing at the door summoned

us out. Flash's mood had not improved, and I knew the homeward journey would be stormy. Either he had been handled in a way he disapproved, or had disliked his temporary lodging, or was cold—something had disturbed him. He was restless and excited.

The Bartlett's house stood beside a retired cross country road, along which I intended to ride for about half a mile, and then strike across country through the Chase. Flash set off in a nervous uneasy way, which kept me fully on the alert; and we had not gone above half the distance to the turning for which I was making, when there began a sudden crashing and rustling in a clump of brush-wood close beside us. The sounds seemed to me to indicate a startled pig, or a cow in difficulties, but I had no time to see. Flash reared, came down again with a tremendous tug at the reins, swerved sharply to the right, and went off like an arrow down a glade we were passing at the moment. I do not think he had ever so thoroughly and completely run away with me. The pace was tremendous, and for a moment made me feel giddy; but after a few strides I really began to enjoy the gallop as much as Flash was evidently doing. He was in splendid condition, and his tremendous spring under me seemed like a happy combination of cast iron and indiarubber. As we rapidly drew near the end of the glade, however, matters began to look serious. It appeared to me to be closed abruptly by the end wall of a low hovel. Before I had time to consider what to do we were quite close to it; then I perceived that Flash saw the danger. In another moment he swerved away to the right, and then—I know not what—a sort of general tornado!

When I could collect my scattered senses I was standing on the ground, holding Flash by the bridle, which with the head piece, Jackson fortunately took care should be always extra strong. The actual occurrence had been on this wise. Swerving suddenly round to the front of the hovel, Flash had made a most unlooked for appearance among a large group of domestic fowls, serenely enjoying their afternoon meal, at the same time striking, with his fore-feet, an old tin pail which was lying on the ground. How

these wretched fowls cackled, and squalled, and fluttered, and ran, no one need be told. Flash startled by the uproar, and the clatter of the pail, had shied violently, and I had come to the ground, but without losing my hold of the reins. My first sensation, as I grasped the fact that I had actually been thrown, was one of utter humiliation, but instant consolation came with the sight of Flash's bare back. The girths had given way. My saddle was on the ground as well as myself. I think that discovery saved me from sitting down and crying with sheer vexation.

The tumult brought out of the cottage an old man, seemingly its only occupant. He looked to have been a tall strong man, but was infirm, and much bent, and seemed very lame and stiff.

'Hey, day,' he exclaimed. 'What's all this? Who be you?'

'I am Miss Dormer,' the Dean's daughter, Mrs. L'Estrange's niece,' I added, remembering that I was on Colonel L'Estrange's land. 'I was riding, and a pig or something rustling in the bushes frightened the pony, and he ran away. Then when he kicked the pail, he shied, and the girths broke.'

'Oh, ho! You be the Dean's little miss, be you? and that's your black pony. I've heard of him. My word but he's a good one'—and he gave his head a shake. After contemplating the scene in silence for a moment, he added. 'Them girths don't look as if they'd ha' broke so easy. They looks well on to new.'

I was myself revolving that very point. I knew Jackson was as particular about my girths as about my bridle, and always superintended the saddling of Flash himself. 'I know they are new,' I said. 'They must be rotten stuff.'

'We'll have a look,' he said, and hobbling forward, he lifted the saddle, not without difficulty, and placed it on a rough chopping block close to him. Then he seated himself on an old stool, and proceeded to examine the girths. 'That's good enough girthing,' he said. 'It didn't never ought to ha' broke that way. Then he put on a pair of old spectacles, closely inspected the frayed ends, laid them down, and asked rather sharply—

'You been stoppin' anywhere since you came out?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I went to call on Mrs. Bartlett. Why?'

'Them girths has been cut.'

'Cut,' I exclaimed, 'it can't be. Look at the frayed ends. Besides, they were all right when I mounted.'

'Just you look close. They weren't cut clean through, only just so as they'd be sure to break with a strain on a sudden.'

A closer inspection showed me he was right. But how could such a thing have happened in Mr. Bartlett's stable? Then in a moment I remembered Flash's uneasiness and the gipsies.

'Do you think the gipsies would do it,' I asked.

I saw he started. 'Gipsies,' he said. 'What made you think of them?'

I told him just what happened. He muttered something very like an oath.

'Surely they wouldn't have done such a thing, just out of mischief,' I said.

"Twere done for more nor mischief,' he shortly answered. 'How be you to get home?'

'I don't know. Can't you give me some strong thread and a needle? I think I could patch them together then.'

'Not I,' he said. Then he reflected a moment. 'You come along of me,' he added. 'I think I can manage it.'

'Lifting the saddle on to Flash's back as he spoke, he led the way along a narrow track through the copse. Not I suppose for a very long distance, though it seemed so to me, for our progress was slow. At last we emerged into a clearing, and there, close before me, was the gipsies' camp, and not far off, at the door of a tent, was sitting the very woman whose bundle I had carried.

There were only two or three men lounging about, and they at once gathered round my conductor. An excited angry colloquy followed, from which I rapidly gathered the true facts of the case. The gipsies had, it appeared, for some time had their eye on Flash, as a valuable acquisition, and the old man roundly charged the two lads I had seen with having contrived to partially cut the girths, and then made the noise which had startled the pony, in hopes a violent shy would produce the very accident which had subsequently happened, and that then they would be able

to catch the pony and make off. Probably the attempt would have been successful but for Flash's excited state having kept me on my guard, and prevented my so far losing my balance as to cause any strain on the girths when he bolted.

In the midst of the discussion the two culprits themselves appeared upon the scene. I was fairly trembling with anger. Such a plot against my dear Flash! who was at that moment putting his nose caressingly against my cheek, as if to tell me how sorry he was for what he had done.

'There,' I said. 'Those are the very two men I saw. And I am quite sure it was they who did it. And you gipsies are nasty mean cowards to do such a thing to a little girl like me. I might have been very much hurt if I had fallen on that hard road. I shouldn't have thought great strong men like you would have tried to hurt a little girl. And you know,' I added, turning upon the woman, who had come up and joined the group, 'that I did try to help you when I could.'

This candid statement of my sentiments seemed to produce a considerable effect. A stormy discussion began among the gipsies themselves. The young woman's black eyes were flashing angrily, and she spoke eagerly to a handsome man standing beside her. Then both turned upon the two culprits, who looked very crestfallen, and answered sulkily; some of the others putting in a word occasionally. At last the man to whom the woman had spoken turned to me, and said in English:

'To do them justice, little missie, they didn't know you were the little lady that helped my wife. But they should never have done it.'

'Well, she can have her revenge,' said one of the culprits surly. 'She can go and tell, and we'll soon be hunted out of the place.'

'I don't want revenge,' I said. 'You haven't done me any harm, though you've tried. I don't want to hurt you, but I think you are horrid cowards. If you'll patch up my girths for me, so that I can get home, I won't say a word about it, except that they broke when the pony shied, and you mended them.'

But you had better cut them clean first, as if you had done it to make them mend better, or the coachman will see what made them give way ; and I am not going to tell lies to help you.'

The men looked at me, then at each other.

'I can do them,' said the woman. Her husband took up the saddle, and they walked away together. Then I turned my back on the rest disdainfully—I could not get over the meditated wrong to Flash—and spoke to my conductor.

'Do you have rheumatism very much?' I asked. My experience of sundry old crones who came for periodical doles to the Deanery having suggested my diagnosis of the case.

'I be main bad, sometimes. I be always stiff, and haven't never much use of my hands ; but sometimes I be very bad.'

'Is there anything I could bring you that would do you any good? Papa would give me anything, if I asked him.'

'Thank you kindly, missie. I don't know as there's much. Leastways unless it was some flannel, for bandages for my knee. I 'aint got none, now, and it do ache terrible bad sometimes.'

'I can easily get that for you,' I replied. 'I can buy some with my own money. I'll bring you some as soon as I can. Only, mind,' I said, 'I shall not come in. I shall not lose sight of my pony in the Chase again, while those people are about.'

'Nay, missie,' said one of the men. 'You need not fear. We're not so bad as that. If you make no mischief for us out of this business, you need have no fear a gipsy will ever touch a thing of yours again.'

'You wouldn't, perhaps,' I replied. 'But I would not trust them,' and I pointed contemptuously at my late antagonists, 'after what they've tried to do.'

'What one daren't do, another daren't,' replied the man, turning as he spoke to help his comrade, who had just returned with the saddle, which they forthwith proceeded to girth upon Flash.

'I think it'll do now, missie,' said the man who had brought it. 'My wife has done the best she could, but there's not much

length to spare. It won't do for you to try much jumping or scrambling.'

'I don't see how I am to get home then.'

He mused for a moment. Then he said: 'I think I can show you the best way, if you'll follow me.'

Accordingly, I mounted, said good afternoon to my ancient benefactor, bestowed a gracious smile on my conductor's wife, and superbly ignoring the rest of the company, followed my leader across the clearing, in a different direction from that by which we had come, and struck into a narrow pathway. As we crossed an open glade, lying at right angles to our path, however, I suddenly pulled up. Curiously unmindful of any peril to myself, misgivings about Flash again crossed my mind.

'You are not taking me in the direction of Wichborough,' I said.

He looked up with an amused smile. 'How do you know?' he asked.

I pointed up the glade at the sinking sun, shining straight down its length. 'Wichborough is east of us,' I said. 'We are going nearly due south.'

'It is all right,' he replied. 'There are hedges and ditches between you and Wichborough. This path leads to the river. You can ride nicely all down the bank, and there is a good gap in the hedge, close to the bridge, that you can easy get through on to the road. But you're a funny little lady. How came you to know directions by the sun?'

'Just in the way I have come to know a good many other things,' I replied sententiously; 'by listening when older people were talking—Why, there's a bridge!' I abruptly broke off, as we came out of the copse, in full view of the river about half a mile off. 'I never knew there was a bridge there.'

'It is only a foot bridge. You cannot cross it on horseback. There are steps. The path we are on leads straight to it, from the road which passes Mr. Bartlett's house.'

'And where does the path take you after you have crossed the river?' I asked.

'Away to the right, along the edge of the Haunted Copse,

and out on to the London road, just between the turnpike and the cross roads, where the road from Wichborough to Ratchford crosses it.'

'The Haunted Copse!' I exclaimed, in much excitement. 'I never heard of that.'

'Did you never go from Wichborough to Ratchford?'

'Not since I can remember.'

'The road runs right through it.'

'But why is it called the Haunted Copse?'

'I don't know much about it,' he replied, a little reluctantly I thought. 'It's a queer lonely bit of road, and there's a deep hollow, where the trees are thick, and its very dark. They say two people have been murdered there, and that queer things are seen sometimes. Anyway that's its name. Now, this is the pathway along the river bank. You can ride easy the whole way. It's nigh on four miles.'

He looked at the girths again, and gave the saddle a shake. 'I think it'll do,' he said. 'You sit as steadily as you can.'

With a friendly salutation we parted, and I made the best of my way home, discreetly resolving upon total silence with respect to my adventure, beyond the bare facts with which it was necessary to account to Jackson for the mended girths. I was magnanimously determined not to get the gipsies into trouble; also I had personal interests at stake. A full recital of the adventure might lead to curtailment of my wanderings, and I had now new projects in view.

I rode straight to the stable yard. 'Jackson,' I said, 'Flash shied, and the girths broke. Just look.'

'My gracious, Miss Vera!' he exclaimed, 'and they are quite new. Were you thrown, miss?'

'No,' I replied, with dignity. 'I and the saddle came off together. It happened, just by an old man's cottage, and he knew of a gipsies' camp near. He got one of the women to mend the girths for me.'

Jackson was busy examining them. 'They ought never to have given way,' he said.

'Well, they did, but it doesn't matter. But I think, Jackson, you had better say nothing about it. Miss Lambert would only just try to get my riding stopped if she heard about it.'

Jackson agreed very readily. None of the servants loved Miss Lambert. I made my way into the house.

My father was in his study. 'Why, Vera, my child,' he said, 'you are later than I expected. I was beginning to feel a little anxious about you.'

'I had to wait some time,' I replied, 'and then I rode a long way round, to get a better road home. Here is the answer,' and I produced the note.

My father kissed me with more show of feeling than was usual with him. 'You have done good service to-day,' he said. If you show me, now, that you can keep your own counsel, and not give anyone the least hint of what you have done, I shall say you are the most useful little girl I have ever known.'

CHAPTER IV.

THE HAUNTED COPSE.

I WAS doomed to find that difficulties are apt to spring up around playing at mystery. I could not go alone to buy the flannel I required, so I was obliged to confide to Waters what I wanted, and my reason for wanting it.

'But who is this old man, my dear?' she asked.

'I don't know. He lives in a little tumble-down cottage, a long way off, in a wild part of the Chase.'

'But how came you to know anything about him?'

'He was outside his cottage when I was there the other day, and I spoke to him. He is quite an old man, and very stiff and bent, and he says he has rheumatism very badly, and that his knee aches so for want of some flannel bandages. You wouldn't like to lie awake all night yourself, Waters, with a bad pain in your knee for want of a little flannel.'

'I daresay we can get the flannel to him quite well. But I am sure the Dean would not approve of your going visiting cottages by yourself in that way without knowing who lives in them.'

This would not do at all. I had other designs in view which were by no means to be carried out by the sending of succour to my new acquaintance. But I was terribly hampered by the necessity for keeping my true reasons in the background. We argued the point hotly, and at last a compromise was affected. Waters said she would give me the flannel, if I would promise her that before going with it I would ride to the Manor, and ask Mr. Bartlett if there was any objection to my visiting the old man. Waters knew well enough if I made any such promise I should keep it.

It was not long before I was sent with another note. Then I told Mr. Bartlett as much as it suited me to tell him of my adventure, and asked him if he knew the old man.

'Yes,' he replied, 'I know him. He goes by the name of Old Simon. What further name he possesses I do not know. He used to be a forester on the property until he grew too stiff and infirm for work. Since then he has been allowed to live on in the cottage. I wish he was out of it.'

'Why?'

Mr. Bartlett shook his head. 'There isn't much harm in him, I daresay. But he has a daughter married to one of a bad lot, poachers, if nothing worse. And gipsies are often about the place. There will be no harm in your riding round that way to give him the flannel you promised. But I think you had better not make a practice of going there.'

'I don't mean to do so. But will you let him stay on there?'

'Oh, yes. He could not well be turned out. He is a quiet enough old fellow, and was a good workman in his time. He must just stay while he lives. Then the cottage will be pulled down. It is a mere hovel.'

I rode off to the old man's cottage, tied Flash to the paling, in full view of the window, and presented my offering, for which

Simon professed himself very grateful. Then, seeing I was keeping a close watch on Flash, he said—

' You needn't be skeered, missie. The gipsies is all cleared out. They were mortal feared you might split on 'em after all. They went off the next day.'

' They needn't have been afraid I should break my promise.'

' I told 'em so, but I expect they were feared the coachman might get suspicious. Any way, they went off.'

' Won't they come back?'

' Oh, yes. They'll come back some time.'

Then I came out with the question which had quite as much to do with my visit as the promised flannel.

' Do you know the Haunted Copse?'

' Lord, yes, to be sure I do. Why, I was born and brought up about these parts. I can remember it a bigger place than it is now. More of a regular wood like.'

' Is it true that two people have been murdered there?'

' Two. Bless you. A sight more than two, I expect. Why, I can remember three in my time, and I've heard my father say he could mind, in his young days, how it was a common thing. It was a rare place for highwaymen in the old days. Right down in that hollow, when there was more traffic than there is now, the road was naught but a bog in wet weather, and many a carriage got stuck there. Then they had fine chances. I think I must have been just about as big as you when I mind of a farmer being murdered down there, coming home from market with a pocket full of money. Then there was a pedlar murdered there a while after that; and like about thirty-five years ago I mind there was a terrible work about a gentleman, from the barracks I think it was, b^eing murdered there one dark night. They did say as that was out of revenge, not for money. But there was a great stir, and a talk of cutting the copse, but nothing came of it.'

I had listened in breathless fascination. ' Is it really haunted? ' I asked in awe stricken tones.

' Lor, I don't know. I haven't no great belief in them sort of

things. But folk do say as queer things has been seen and heard, I wouldn't say but the gipsies have a hand in that. There's some good bits of ground for camping about there, and they like to keep people off them.'

'Are any of them about now?'

'No. They're all away. They'll not come about here until they're sure there's going to be no work about their trying to get your pony.'

Now was my opportunity in that case. I was devoured with eagerness to visit that copse. A place where murders had been committed, and which was haunted! There was a wonderful and fearful sort of fascination about it. Fearless as I was, however, I don't think I should have cared to make the attempt, save under the conditions of a bright sunny day and a total absence of gipsies.

But how was that longed for goal to be reached? Between me and it flowed the river. If I rode down to the bridge near the Deanery, I could not reach the copse without riding through the town. The next bridge up the river—besides the foot bridge, which I could not cross—was a long way off, beyond Buckton Abbey, Lord Wichborough's place. I was hopelessly cut off from the copse unless I could find some place where it was possible to ford the river. Reckless as I was, I had no thought of trying to swim it, although I possessed some theoretical knowledge on that subject, the result of a conversation I had eagerly listened to in the Deanery drawing-room, between Lord Wichborough and a friend, and carefully stored up in my memory. One part of it was to the purpose now. I knew that the Wich was a safe, though generally deep river, with a good sound bottom. There was no place where there was any danger a horse might stick in the mud.

In search of a possible shallow therefore, I set out, and rode slowly down the bank of the river, critically scrutinizing every yard of its course—a fruitless scrutiny at the moment. For some three-quarters of a mile, at least, downwards from the foot-bridge, the banks of the river were deep and broken. There was

no spot at which a horse could either reach the water, or scramble out the other side. Lower down, where the banks rose little above the surface of the river, there was still no sign of a shallow. The clear water swept steadily along without sign of a ripple or break.

I went home in rather a bad temper. My desire to reach the Haunted Copse naturally increased as the impediments seemed to threaten to be insurmountable. Another day I started on a hunt for shallows higher up the river, making my way up as far as the massive stone wall which surrounded the park at Buckton, but with no better success. Shallows in the Witch there were clearly none, at least within any distance available for my use. I could only console myself with the remembrance that my father occasionally went to the Archdeacon's, somewhere I knew in the direction of Ratchford. Perhaps I could get him to let me go in the carriage some day.

I was not, however, destined to wait for that chance.

One day, at luncheon, my mother, after gazing vacantly out of the window for a time, said to Miss Lambert :

'Is Vera going to ride this afternoon ?'

'Oh, I suppose so,' replied Miss Lambert, in a tone which seemed to imply at once repudiation of all responsibility in the matter, and inability to predict what I might do.

'Then if you would like a drive,' continued my mother, 'will you go with me? I am going to call at Wilton Grange.'

My heart gave a sudden thump. Wilton Grange was, I knew, a little beyond Ratchford. I allowed Miss Lambert to express her somewhat effusive thanks. Then I said :

'May I go in the carriage, too, mamma? I have never been to Ratchford.'

'Yes, you may go if you like.'

'Dear me, Veronica,' put in Miss Lambert, attempting irony, and achieving sour sarcasm, 'what has taken you, to make you wish to go for a quiet, civilized drive with your mamma, instead of tearing about on Flash, like a young savage?'

'I don't care about the drive,' I replied, with uncompromising

candour. ‘I don’t like driving. But I want to go to Ratchford, and I can’t ride there, because I mayn’t go through the town.’

My father laughed. ‘You have not succeeded in driving nature out of your pupil yet, Miss Lambert,’ he said.

‘No, indeed, and never shall.’

‘I hope not,’ he replied, with some emphasis, and I saw she coloured. I do not think my father had ever liked her.

‘Well, papa,’ I said,—what could I say—‘that is just the truth.’

‘Quite so, Vera,’ he replied, as he rose from the table. ‘I’m afraid “just the truth” will make your life no bed of roses.’

I laid that remark aside for future meditation, wondering greatly what he meant. I have been finding out all my life since.

In the course of another hour, I was in the carriage, and on my way to the accomplishment of my desires. I grew quite excited when we entered what I knew must be the Haunted Copse,—a thick copse, mainly composed of hazel, birch, and alder, with occasional trees of larger growth, oaks, elms, and beeches towering above them. Then the carriage began to descend a steep pitch, and in a few moments we were in the depths of the hollow through which the road ran. If ever a place might have won an evil repute, merely from appearance, that fateful solitude was the spot. Although it was early autumn, the ground felt quite soft and splashy beneath the wheels. A sombre gloom reigned. A group of gnarled old trees clustered closely on both sides of the road, their foliage fairly meeting over it in some places. On a dark night, the darkness of that dismal hole must have been such as may be felt.

‘Dear me,’ said Miss Lambert, ‘what a dreadful place. Just the scene a novelist would choose for that of a murder.’

Miss Lambert was wont to enlarge fluently on the evils of novel reading, but I always suspected she kept herself pretty well supplied with what she was pleased to term ‘the pernicious trash.’ Her remark made me start, but I only said, without the least intention of being sententious;

'I suppose that is because it is just the sort of place which a murderer would choose if he wanted to kill anyone.'

Miss Lambert looked extremely angry, but she said nothing, and I was much too closely occupied in topographical observations to heed her. I wanted to make out, if I could, the pathway the gipsy had told me opened upon the London road, near to where the Ratchford road crossed it. I saw where it was directly we came to the cross roads, about a hundred yards distant, closed by a high awkward stile. A very brilliant idea forthwith took possession of my mind, concentration of all my thoughts upon which enabled me to support with much equanimity sundry disagreeable sneering remarks from Miss Lambert, during the time my mother was paying her visit at Wilton Grange.

I pointed out the stile to my mother as we were returning. 'It is the entrance to a path, mamma,' I said, 'which leads down to a footbridge over the river, and there is a nice path all along the river bank right down to the Deanery grounds. May I get out and walk home that way?'

'My dear Veronica,' exclaimed Miss Lambert, without giving my mother time to reply, 'all alone? and it must be seven or eight miles.'

'It is nothing of the kind,' I replied. 'Please stop a moment, Jackson. It is just four miles from the footbridge to Wicksborough, and it cannot be more than a mile from the stile down to the footbridge. It can't be more than five miles altogether, can it Jackson?'

'No, Miss Vera, it is not more than five miles,' Jackson answered from the box.

'Then mayn't I go, mamma?' I urged, eagerly, dreading to lose so favourable an opportunity for an exploring expedition. 'I can walk five miles quite well.'

My mother hesitated. I think she had been half asleep, and was only by degrees arriving at a comprehension of the point in dispute. Jackson, willing enough to humour me, waited. At this moment who should come over the stile but Mr. Bartlett! Seeing us at a stand he came towards the carriage.

Before he had time to speak I burst out, 'Oh, Mr. Bartlett, do tell mamma it is quite safe for me to walk home by the river. I want to do it so much.'

'Well, I don't know,' he said. 'It is rather a lonely walk for you. But I am only going as far as the turnpike, to leave a note. Then I am going to walk into Wichborough myself. If Mrs. Dormer will let you go with me, I will see you safe into the Deanery grounds.'

To this plan there could be no objection, save Miss Lambert's natural and invariable objection to my getting leave to do anything I particularly wished, and that, under the circumstances, she was wise enough not to express. In a few moments the carriage had borne away her petty spitefulness, and my mother's placid neutrality, and I, in high delight, was walking towards the stile with Mr. Bartlett.

'You had better get over the stile,' he said, when we had reached it, 'and walk slowly on towards the next field. I will follow you directly.'

I obeyed, and found myself in a large pasture field, with a well defined path leading across it to another high, clumsy stile on the opposite side, the Haunted Copse sweeping down towards the path at some distance further on. I looked about me in a keenly observant frame of mind. Suppose I had been able to cross the river on Flash, could I have ridden over the ground I was on? Unquestionably not. The fields themselves were, of course, easy enough riding, but I had been often allowed to go to the meets with Jackson, even to follow, to a certain extent, and child though I was, I had a very fair idea what a horse could do. I sagely pronounced judgment to myself that it would need very careful riding to bring a good hunter over that ground, the hedges, fences, and ditches were of a serious character. I inspected a gap in the hedge skirting the high road, and decided that the ditch alone would have been too much for Flash.

For some reason, I know not why, unless it might be due to the strong hold my adventure with the gipsies and the subsequent information I had secured about the Haunted Copse had

taken on my mind, the topographical features of that scene imprinted themselves very strongly on my memory, and the idea of riding over the ground fixed itself pertinaciously upon me. Even after Mr. Bartlett joined me, as we walked down towards the bridge, I was busy examining hedges, ditches, and fences with a critical eye. Our path skirted for some distance close along the fence of the Haunted Copse, and I questioned Mr. Bartlett about it.

'Do you think old Simon can really remember three murders there?' I asked. One murder thirty years since, seemed to me a prehistoric event.

'I have no doubt he can. Murders were quite common there to within a date well within his memory.'

'And is it really haunted?' I asked, glancing somewhat dubiously at the innocent looking hazel bushes and birch saplings. He laughed. 'Very much haunted, I suspect, by very able-bodied spectres, who find much profit in playing the ghost. I never saw any other ghost there than an old white pony, which had strayed into the hollow one dark night, and gave me the worst fright I ever had in my life.'

'But is the road dangerous now?'

'Well, I hardly know about that. It has ceased to be profitable, which is more to the purpose. When the Wichborough bank was the only one in the neighbourhood, a great deal of money was brought to it from Ratchford and Buckton, and all that part of the country, and all had to pass through that hollow, so that marauders knew the place was worth watching just about the quarter and fair days. Now there is a bank in Ratchford, it is different. Far less money is brought from that direction to Wichborough, and at much less certain dates. I have not heard of any attempt at robbery there for a long time.'

We reached the footbridge as he spoke, and my special interest in the walk faded away. We were again on ground which had neither the charm of novelty, nor the fascination of mystery. But the whole episode of my eventful ride, and subsequent introduction to the gipsies and the Haunted Copse, made a most deep

and lasting impression upon me. Brought up amidst the aristocratic exclusiveness of the Cathedral precincts, and supplied only with such imaginative literature as Miss Lambert deemed suitable for my encouragement in the narrow paths of conventional propriety, and decorous uselessness, this was my first glimpse of the broad ocean of life lying beyond my circumscribed limits; my first actual contact with that lawless side of existence with which I fully believe there was in my moral composition a strongly marked vein of sympathy. Perchance the shadow of the future was even then upon the scene, for that apparently unimportant walk was destined hereafter to be fruitful of momentous consequences.

CHAPTER V.

PRICKING A WINDBAG.

MY secret expeditions to the Manor continued at irregular intervals, but it was not until some years later that I understood the exact nature of the service upon which I had been employed. Colonel L'Estrange was beginning to develop symptoms of an alarming character, symptoms, I fully believe, although the course of the future prevented the fact from ever being distinctly proved, of some affection of the brain. Not only did his general irritability and natural capacity for rendering himself odious greatly increase, but his sentiments towards Conrad began to occasion Aunt Marion the keenest anxiety. The sort of contemptuous indifference which he had always manifested towards him seemed to be changing into positive aversion, and Aunt Marion, with that sort of superficial quickness which the silliest women are apt to possess, soon lighted on a suspicion which, supposing it correct, rendered that aversion a matter of the gravest importance. Colonel L'Estrange had a nephew, a certain Gilbert Wilbraham, a man only about ten years younger than himself, and of by no means excellent reputation. He was crafty,

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subtle, and absolutely unprincipled, and had always possessed an amount of influence over his uncle which had greatly annoyed Aunt Marion, and made her persistently endeavour to keep them as much as possible apart. Of late she feared she had observed traces of more than usually frequent communication between them, with studious efforts to conceal the fact from her; and on that day when I had surprised her in tears in the Deanery drawing-room, some slight circumstance had caused her vague alarm to take definite shape, and she had rushed off to overwhelm my father with a torrent of mingled shrewd surmise and incoherent reasoning.

'He is setting his uncle against Conrad, I am certain. You know, Herbert, Colonel L'Estrange hates sickly people. If I had been an invalid I believe he would have murdered me. And I know quite well what Gilbert is after. He knows the property is not entailed, and he will persuade his uncle that Conrad is such a weak, sickly creature he is quite incompetent to manage it, and get him to leave it all to him, and give Conrad only a good annuity.'

At first my father had said 'impossible.' But Aunt Marion was armed with unquestionable facts, which forced him to admit there was ground for alarm. Hence the importance Mr. Bartlett suddenly assumed. He had been long in most confidential relations with Colonel L'Estrange, and it was very unlikely that any important arrangements would be made about property, without his suspicions being aroused. He was a most honourable, upright man, in no way behind others who knew him in regard for Conrad L'Estrange, and very ready to do the utmost he could to serve him. The great difficulty had been to enable Aunt Marion and him to communicate freely, unsuspected by Colonel L'Estrange—a difficulty happily surmounted by my capacity for cross country riding, and holding my tongue.

Of course I knew very little of what had passed. I simply carried notes and said nothing about it, and I often paid Old Simon a visit, to take him some small benefaction on which I spent my pocket-money. I had decided for myself that Mr.

Bartlett's warning was unnecessary. The old man had really a regard for me, and if any objectional characters were ever about the place, he took very good care I should never come across them. In all respects, for some years, the tenor of my life remained unaltered. I simply outgrew my frocks, and Miss Lambert's power of control, such as they were, at about the same pace.

How long she might have stayed I know not, had I not one day got upon the track of a discovery, which led to a final rupture in our strained relations. Arithmetic had always been a labour and sorrow to me, and the text of many a sermon from Miss Lambert, on stupidity, want of attention, and all the rest of it; always winding up with some reference to my 'Tomboy habits,' which were declared to be the source of my defalcations. At last, one day, after a stormy morning, when Miss Lambert again and again returned my sum as wrong, on reference to the book, I was ordered to remain at home in the afternoon to work it out, the book being locked up, and the correct answer given to me on a slip of paper, so that I might not copy the sum. I toiled in vain, and was growing momentarily more puzzled and stupid when Conrad suddenly looked in.

'Cumming told me you were here alone, Vera. Why, what is the matter, child? You look very dismal.'

I expounded the difficulty. Conrad took the paper from my hand, and rapidly worked the sum. 'You are quite right, my dear child,' he said.

'I can't be. This is the answer.'

'Where's the book?'

'Miss Lambert locked it up, for fear I should copy the sum.'

'Well, book or no book, your sum is correct. If this is the answer in the book it is some mistake—a misprint probably. Do you understand the sum?'

'Not a bit.'

'I thought not. Go out into the garden, now. You are not fit to learn anything; and come to me to-morrow morning.'

He was just turning to leave the room when Miss Lambert

came in. She looked somewhat taken aback at sight of my cousin.

'Have you finished your sum, Vera?' she asked.

'Yes, Miss Lambert,' replied Conrad, 'and what is more, she worked it correctly from the very first. If you have copied the answer rightly, the book is wrong. It will be well if you work the sums yourself, to see they are right, in future, and do not keep the child in, working because of a blunder in her book.'

Miss Lambert looked awfully angry, but she dared not say a word. She knew Conrad was quite an authority on figures. I had my lesson the next day, and as Conrad's masterly expositions swept away all the difficulties like cobwebs, light on various cognate subjects began to dawn upon me; light which broadened and deepened rapidly in consequence of my father asking Mr. Charlote to undertake to give me lessons in both arithmetic and German, a language then little taught in England. Mr. Charlote, like Conrad, was a thorough scholar, and under his teaching the perception planted by Conrad rapidly matured. Miss Lambert was a mere teaching machine, handing on from a book what she did not herself understand. Once brought under thorough teaching I saw it in every branch of instruction which she undertook, and then the final catastrophe could not be long delayed.

It came when I was about fourteen, over a music lesson. Miss Lambert got very cross, and told me I was the stupidest girl she had ever had to teach. I was angry enough to be perfectly cool, and calmly replied I had no doubt she had had plenty of experience, for that seeing she did not herself understand the things she undertook to teach, it was not surprising if her pupils all grew very stupid.

Thereupon she burst into a violent fit of hysterics, and there was a general disturbance. I was summoned to a solemn audience in the study, rebuked by my father for my impertinence, with a solemnity which I instantly detected was assumed, and told I was to be sent to school immediately. Miss Lambert left the next day, after trying to get up a pathetic parting scene with

me, which was a dismal failure. There was, in truth, only one circumstance in the arrangement to be regretted, and that was that it removed me from the influence of Mr. Charlote, from whose fervent yet manly religious tone, fine sense of honour, and fearless devotion to truth, where and howsoever found, I was learning what was of far more importance than German and arithmetic.

Strange to say I got on extremely well at school. My Bohemianism was never of a rampant character, simply because it was the genuine product, not the bad imitation which springs from mere desire to attract attention. The conventional rules and regulations, and all the shams of so-called society—far heavier shackles in those days than now—I was determined should have no hold on me ; but I had not the least wish to obtrude my sentiments on anyone else, or to attract anyone's attention by my independence. I had quite sense enough to see that in a school personal liberty must to a great extent give way, to say nothing of the fact that the result of my being thus brought into familiar associations with girls was that I conceived a great contempt for them, with their silly friendships, petty squabbles, and jealousies, and absurd confidences. Rules and regulations, I inwardly decided, were extremely necessary for such a set of inane gigglers.

My mother used to write to me very regularly, giving me minute information regarding trifles, and generally passing over important points with an unexplained relative. Thus I was duly informed that the cat had kittens, that the Bishop had dined at the Deanery, and that Lady Alicia had worn a pink satin gown, which she thought most unbecoming in a bishop's wife ; but she only alluded to Colonel L'Estrange having had so severe an attack of bronchitis that his life had been for a short time despaired of, by adding a postscript to a letter to the effect that he was better, but the doctors strongly urged his going abroad for a year at least. Soon afterwards, there came a letter from my father. There was generally something special to communicate when he wrote.

'I have good news for you. Mr. Bartlett has resigned. That is not the good news, only the prologue to it. He feels the anxiety of the position too much for him. Now, there happens to be in the north a certain Mr. Warren, land agent to Sir Brook Wilbraham, Gilbert's uncle, whose son, also trained to the business, is a few years younger than Conrad. Conrad knows this younger Warren, and was able at one time to do him some service, for which he has always been most grateful. He is as much attached to your cousin as most people who know him. Gilbert, all unconscious of this acquaintance, is trying all he can to get Colonel L'Estrange to appoint Warren Mr. Bartlett's successor, and will probably succeed. He thinks he will thus get a creature of his own into an important position, whereas he will place a staunch friend of Conrad's in the very place he would most wish to keep from him. I need hardly tell you to keep this fact a profound secret. Warren's chances of serving Conrad will greatly depend on Wilbraham being kept in entire ignorance of any sort of prior acquaintance between them.'

I heard a good deal about this Mr. Warren when I was at home for the holidays. My father was much impressed in his favour, pronouncing him to be a fine, manly, sensible, well-informed fellow, whom Lord Wichborough declared to be the best rider to hounds he had ever seen out with the pack. My mother also was placidly favourable in her verdict, as far as Mr. Warren was concerned, but Mrs. Warren found no favour in her eyes. Not even a bishop's wife in pink satin was such an offence to her. She almost grew animated when my father said Mrs. Warren was a harmless little woman.

'Harmless ; oh yes, if you like. I never meant that she used bad language, or stole one's forks and spoons ; but she is a vulgar silly, commonplace woman. I cannot think how a man of Mr. Warren's type ever came to marry her.'

I had thought my mother looking aged, and far from well when I was at home for that vacation ; and shortly before the close of the next term Waters one day arrived unexpectedly to break to me the news that she was dead, and convey me home.

She had died quite suddenly, only the day before, of some seizure of the heart.

I was startled and shocked, but not heartbroken, and I did not profess to be. The hurry of hasty packing, and arranging of everything with a view to my not returning to school, left me little time to think. But when at last the bustle was over, and I was seated in the railway carriage, with leisure for reflection, I was somewhat surprised to find how really grieved I was. I could not yet realise that my mother had no longer any part in the daily life of the Deanery, but I think the saddest thought in my mind was that I could recall no word or look of hers which had ever betrayed that she loved me. She was kind and good-natured to every one, and to me among the rest. But as for love, to this day I am wholly in the dark as to whether she had the least spark of a feeling meriting the name of love for any living creature.

Colonel L'Estrange and Aunt Marion were still abroad, but immediately on hearing what had happened she wrote my father one of her fussy letters, full of meddlesome advice. She hoped they would be returning to Wichenborough Court soon, so that she might be on the spot to take general superintendence at the Deanery. But under any circumstances it would be necessary for me to have some woman of middle age living in the house as a duenna. My father must look out for some one at once. I was much too young to be left entirely alone, under any circumstances, and my wild gipsy ways made it doubly impossible. She was sure my father would now feel how well grounded were those remonstrances on her part to which he and poor dear Henrietta had always turned a deaf ear. She could only hope he might not yet have graver cause to regret his action in this respect. But we must hope for the best. My father gave me the letter to read.

'Oh, papa,' I exclaimed, 'you won't afflict me with a duenna, will you? I will not do anything you disapprove if you only tell me.'

'You need not be alarmed, my love. With Waters and Murray in the house, and my own constant presence at home, I consider

it quite unnecessary. I am not going to expose myself to peril of that sort,' he added, with an emphasis I could not quite understand !

'And am I to make any difference in my habits,' I asked.

'Not very much,' he answered with a smile. 'I will not require you to become a conventional young lady. I like my wild little gipsy better. There are only one or two little points I should like you to guard. At present, of course, you will go nowhere, but I should wish you always to take either Waters or Murray with you if you walk in the town; and let one of them go in the carriage with you if you drive to any great distance. Do not ride much on the public roads without Jackson. I have no objections to your old rambles about the Chase; only do not break your neck.'

Thus, to the horror of the Close, and doubtless of the town, I was established at eighteen years of age as mistress of the Deanery, under no other feminine guardianship than that of the two faithful servants who had known me from infancy. I doubt if there was another house in England to which the death of its mistress would have made so absolutely no difference. Yet for that very reason I jealously guarded every memento of my mother. Her sofa still stood in its accustomed place in the drawing-room, with the small table beside it, on which was her sandal wood workbox, holding a piece of fancy work with the needle still sticking in it, and the book she had been reading, with an ivory paper knife shut in to mark her place. I would not allow these things to be touched, or anything she had left lying about to be moved. Had hers been one of those powerful personalities whose absence leaves a blank dreary void which can only gradually fill as the changes and chances of this mortal life alter all its conditions, I do not think I should have cared if every memorial of her had been swept away. But her very incapacity to leave a mark, even upon her own house and family, seemed to me a sort of pitiful appeal for preservation of everything which should prevent her being forgotten. To have put out of sight these little reminders that she had once lived and

moved among us would have seemed to me like ruthlessly thrusting out of notice some weak helpless creature unable to defend itself.

The Close naturally felt bound to expostulate with my father on his reckless defiance of all conventional rules. 'My dear Mr. Dean,' urged Mrs. Cranley in my presence one day when visitors began to be again admitted to the Deanery, 'you really must reconsider your determination, and not allow this dear child to remain here all by herself.'

'I have no intention of abandoning the Deanery, and removing my establishment,' replied my father.

'Oh, you know quite well what I mean. Vera must have a duenna. Now, do be advised by an experienced mother like myself. There is Mrs. Raymond, Canon Cranley's widowed sister, such a charming woman, and so intellectual. I am sure she would come to you with pleasure. She is not too well off, poor thing. And she has a sweet daughter, just Vera's age.'

'And an only son,' put in my father, looking calmly in Mrs. Cranley's face. She coloured, but tried to answer carelessly.

'Oh, Edmund? He is away at Cambridge.'

'Precisely. But I presume he would expect to share his mother's and sister's home during the vacations. I am obliged, Mrs. Cranley, for the interest you take in Vera. But I find myself quite well able to manage my own affairs.'

I had never heard my father speak so sternly. His general manner was singularly courteous and winning. Mrs. Cranley retired, evidently discomfited. Then he laughed heartily.

'Why did you answer so sharply, papa?' I asked.

'Because I am thoroughly on the defensive, Vera. I do not believe there is, at this moment, a single woman about the Close, or in all the country round, either, who has not an incomparable paragon ready to be established, either by force or fraud, within the Deanery walls. Mrs. Cranley's report of the state of the defences may be useful, and save me further trouble.'

I am not certain that my father found the foe quite so easily routed as he fondly imagined. At any rate he announced not

long afterwards, somewhat abruptly, that he intended to take me abroad for some months, and we started almost immediately. This step, at least, met with Aunt Marion's full approval. It would be, she said, a great advantage to me, and remove much of the anxiety occasioned to her by my father's strange infatuation in not providing me with a duenna. Every year that the probable consequences of that disastrous determination could be staved off increased the chance of my learning to be a little less wilful and independent. Moreover, she hoped that soon the danger would be decreased by her own presence at Wichenborough Court. At least, that was to say, she was of course trying to persuade Colonel L'Estrange to stay abroad as long as possible, but, as she had no doubt, the moment he fully made out that was her wish he would hurry back to England, she quite anticipated that ere long she should be at hand to fill the place of a mother to me.

CHAPTER VI.

DIPLOMACY.

BY the time we returned to the Deanery my mother had been dead nearly a year. Aunt Marion had by some means succeeded in keeping Colonel L'Estrange abroad, but they were expected shortly at the Court. Her vague, incoherent letters did not seem to imply any improvement in his mental and moral condition.

My first dread reminder of my new and untried responsibilities fell upon me at breakfast one morning, when my father remarked :

'Vera, we must have a dinner party.'

Dinner parties were terrible performances in those days, and dinner parties at the Deanery, where aristocratic exclusiveness was mingled with ecclesiastical solemnity, were functions to which not even Lady Alicia's pink satin gown had been able to lend any vivacity, greater than that due to a certain shock of

outraged decorum. My heart sank at the announcement. Bohemians do not always possess quite such a superabundant share of self-confidence as is laid to their credit. However, I made no sign. I only replied, 'Very well. You must give me a list then to write out the invitations from.'

'It will have to be rather a large party, I think,' he said. 'I suppose you would rather not wait until your Aunt Marion's return. I could put off having it till then, if you like; but I think she will only worry you.'

'Oh yes, please have it before she comes,' I exclaimed. 'She would worry and fidget me beyond all endurance. What day shall it be?'

'I think I will not settle until I can see Lord Wichborough, and find out what day he is disengaged. You would like to have him to support you, I think.'

'Oh yes,' I replied. 'I shall not feel half so nervous if he takes me in to dinner.' The mere suggestion raised my spirits. If there was a human being beyond the circle of my own family, whom I really loved, it was Lord Wichborough. He was my ideal of an English gentleman. Not that of most people, I know. The Wichborough verdict on him was that he was too blunt, not polished enough. But his bluntness was of patrician quality, and if he wanted polish, it was solely because he was not hard enough to take it. I had, moreover, further reasons for admiring him. I knew something about his past life, and the brave fortitude with which he had borne a great disaster, and the cruel blighting of bright hopes. When about thirty years of age he had fallen in love with a mere child. Through long years of mingled hope and fear he had waited, and then the girl, as loveable as she was beautiful, had voluntarily chosen him from among a number of suitors. Six weeks after their marriage their travelling carriage was overturned, and Lady Wichborough received injuries to the spine which doomed her to an invalid's couch for life. No murmur over his blighted hopes was ever heard from Lord Wichborough. He had been the constant companion and tenderest nurse of his suffering wife, and their mutual devotion

had evoked pure sunshine out of the gloom. They led, of course, a very retired life. Lord Wichborough was master of the hounds, and an excellent country gentleman. That was the extent of his public activity.

I had always been a special favourite of his. In years gone by, it had chanced that during one of my solitary rambles on Flash I had come upon him in the Chase, in rather forlorn condition. Some trifling mishap impeding his progress had resulted in his losing the pack, and finally himself. I happened to know in which direction the hunt had gone, and undertook to guide him. I believe I gave him much judicious advice on the way, as to where he could and could not surmount impediments. He had been highly amused, and had bestowed on me the title of his 'little mother.'

On the present occasion I had special reasons for rejoicing in the prospect of meeting him. Dire projects were floating in my brain, projects calculated to cause the Close collectively to shake as in an ague fit, and these projects would be far more likely to be crowned with success if I could enlist Lord Wichborough on my side, than under any other circumstances. My mind was strongly set on getting leave to hunt, in days, be it remembered, when the appearance of women in the hunting field was comparatively rare. I had hardly dared to hope my father would sanction such a proceeding. But if I could get Lord Wichborough to plead my cause, the case would be different. My father had a great regard for him, and then, he was master of the hounds.

The momentous day dawned. I had nothing to think about until the guests began to arrive. All prior responsibility rested with Cumming and the cook. Mrs. Cranley appeared first, in a very gushing frame of mind. I do not think the term was invented then, but it excellently fits her condition.

'Dear child,' she said, affectionately patting my hand, 'How well you are looking. Rather nervous, love, are you not? Well, we shall do our best to help you, you know.'

Then in came Mrs. Mortimer, from Wilton Grange. 'Dear Vera,' she said, 'I came in good time on purpose. I was sure

you would like to have an old friend of your dear mother's to help you,' and she bestowed on Mrs. Cranley a look which was certainly whatever may be the refined and feminine equivalent for the masculine more direct and outspoken 'What the devil are *you* doing here.'

Then they proceeded to patronise and support me by relegating me to oblivion, while they struggled gallantly for the position of intimate friend of the family. But very soon came Lord Wichborough, and the scene was shifted with pantomimic rapidity. I do not know how he did it; he only came and seated himself on the sofa beside me, but in five minutes I was in my place as mistress of the house, and Mrs. Cranley and Mrs. Mortimer had subsided into an insignificance they did not seem to relish.

It was a terrible moment to me when dinner was announced, and I knew I had to tell off the assembled guests. My father looked at me and half hesitated. Lord Wichborough glanced from him to me, and started up.

'Away with you, Mr. Dean,' he said laughing. 'My little mother is my charge. I am a most exacting son. I allow no interference.'

My father gave his arm to Lady Arnold, and disappeared. In a few moments Lord Wichborough had arranged the train, and we were all on our way to the diningroom. 'Thank you so much,' I said as we crossed the hall. 'I was so nervous about it. I suppose it is very foolish not to be able to play one's part better.'

'You are playing your part admirably, my dear,' he said. 'Nothing is more odious than the finished ease of a practised woman of the world on a young girl. If I had a daughter I should be well pleased to see her playing hostess in my house as you are doing to-night.'

It was not until dessert was on the table that I found a good opportunity for carrying out my design. Then seeing that Canon Cranley, who was on my left hand, was engaged in deep discussion with his partner, I said quietly—

'Do you disapprove of girls hunting, Lord Wichborough?'

He was leaning forward at the moment, with both arms resting on the table, apparently absorbed in peeling a peach. He neither moved nor answered for a moment. Then, looking up at me, he said—

'Which being interpreted means?'

'That I want very much to hunt, and that I think if you would support me I might perhaps get leave to do so. If I were to ask papa now he would simply extinguish me by saying he could not allow it because he was sure you would be annoyed.'

'Exactly. Now I can answer your question. As a rule I detest girls in the hunting field; but nothing would please me better than to see you there.'

'Oh, thank you,' I said in great exultation. 'Will you tell papa so?'

'Certainly I will. But what are you going to hunt upon? Not on my old friend Flash?'

'Oh, poor Flash, no. He is still a gallant animal, but it is something of a gallant wreck. I must persuade papa to get me a horse.'

'Look here, Vera, I will not only back you up, I will give you a hunter. You shall have Swallow.'

I fear I stared open-mouthed at Lord Wichborough. Give me Swallow, his famous mare, one of an almost matchless breed of hunters, just six years old, and broken in by himself! Was I dreaming? or had I really heard the words?

'Give me Swallow,' I almost gasped at last.

'Yes, my dear. You need not mention the fact, Vera, but I am not so young as I was, and not only have I gained weight, but I am conscious of riding more heavily than I did. I hardly think that Swallow is quite up to my weight when the day chances to be a specially severe one; and I begin to have an unconquerable dislike to the idea of being on a tired horse. So you shall have Swallow, and then the Dean must be quite satisfied.'

'But can I ride her?' I asked.

He laughed. 'I should like to see the thing you could not

ride. There is but one risk in riding Swallow, and that is one which will never occur to you. If your nerve failed, and you tried to check her at anything she meant to do, I would not answer for your not having a nasty accident. It irritates her most dangerously. She has the soundest judgment of any horse I ever knew, and she never loses her head. She will never try anything she is not certain about; but she can do what few horses can, and might be rather too daring for a nervous rider. There will be no fear of your nerve failing you, so you will be perfectly safe. Now, dear child,' he added in a lower tone, 'away to the drawing-room. I will come soon and help you with your mob of women. Meantime I will talk to the Dean.'

I was really quite unequal to my responsibilities then. The idea of possessing Swallow! It was positively bewildering.

Mrs. Cranley, however, whose ears were always on the alert, had caught some fragments of our discussion. She pounced upon me the moment we were in the drawing-room.

'My dear Vera, what was that I heard about your riding Lord Wichborough's famous Swallow?'

'Lord Wichborough is going to give Swallow to me,' I replied.

'To you, my dear. What possible use can you make of her?'

'Ride upon her,' I replied sententiously.

'Of course I did not suppose you intended her to draw the carriage,' retorted Mrs. Cranley, sharply. 'But she is only fit for a hunter.'

'To hunt upon her is just what I hope to do.'

'Hunt?' screamed the Close in chorus. 'The Dean will never allow such a thing.'

'I hope he will. Lord Wichborough has promised to try and persuade him.'

'I never heard of such an outrageous suggestion,' said Mrs. Cranley. 'I do hope the Dean will think twice before he gives his consent to such a proposition as that. But really'—then she paused, and she and Mrs. Duncombe exchanged significant glances, as much as to say that after the Dean had so recklessly

set at naught the excellent counsels of the Close, it was impossible to feel sure to what length he might not go.

I was getting rather angry, and I fancy Lady Arnold, a good-natured old dowager, saw it, for she changed the subject. For some unexpressed reason Mrs. Cranley was evidently furious. She could not recover herself, and I saw she shot a vindictive glance at Lord Wichborough when he shortly after entered, and placing himself on the hearthrug gave me a nod, saying, I think it is all right.'

My father followed almost immediately, and as he passed my chair, he laid his hand on my shoulder, saying—

'Well, madcap, so you have been wheedling Lord Wichborough into pleading for you. I only hope you will not be a trouble to him.'

'Faith,' exclaimed Lord Wichborough laughing, 'if I don't break my neck in a vain attempt to keep pace with her, it is little other trouble I shall have.'

'Really, Mr. Dean,' broke in Mrs. Cranley, 'you don't mean you are going to allow Vera to hunt.'

'Yes, since Lord Wichborough has no objection.'

'Well, I must say I think it is a most indecorous proceeding.'

Then, for the only time in my life, I saw the aristocratic stare. Lord Wichborough turned and looked at Mrs. Cranley in silence for a moment. She was not a woman easily abashed, but I saw she coloured and moved uneasily.

'Pray, why indecorous?' he asked at length.

'Well, really my lord, I think you must see it yourself. The Dean does not hunt himself, and Mr. L'Estrange is hardly ever in the field now. Under these circumstances the hunting-field cannot be a proper place for a girl of Miss Dormer's age.'

'When Miss Dormer does go out with the hounds, Mrs. Cranley, I shall take very good care it is distinctly understood that she is as much under my protection as if she were my own daughter. She is a rider the charge of whom will be no irksome responsibility, even to the master of the hounds. Is that an escort sufficient to meet the demands of propriety?'

'Oh, of course, in that case I have nothing more to say.'

If she had nothing more to say, she had plenty more to look. I never saw a woman look so angry. It was not until later that I learned the cause of a wrath which had, I suspect, something to do with the startling results of my hunting proclivities. Edith Cranley, grown up a really very pretty girl, but vain enough to thirst eagerly after notoriety of any sort, had essayed the spurious Bohemianism which springs from love of attracting attention; and the previous season while we were abroad, she had taken to going to the meets on horseback, and thrusting herself into prominent positions. She had been a great nuisance, and some caustic remark of Lord Wichborough's had reached Mrs. Cranley's ears. Hence her anger and mortification at his action as regarded myself, and the determination which I have no doubt she took that Edith's opportunities should keep pace with mine.

'Good bye till we meet in the hunting field, Vera,' Lord Wichborough said, when his carriage was announced. 'I am going to take Lady Wichborough to one of the German baths immediately. I shall be back in time for the hunting season. Swallow shall be taken up in good time, and put in thorough training for you, before she is sent to the Deanery stables. And am quite ready to lay twenty to one on who gets the brush the first day you are out.'

I believe he said it on purpose to annoy Mrs. Cranley. If so she had her revenge. It still wanted some two months to the beginning of the hunting season. What an age it seemed to my impatience, though I had plenty to occupy both my time and thoughts. Aunt Marion came home shortly afterwards, and for the punishment of my sins, was graciously pleased to declare herself most agreeably disappointed in me. I had improved very much, and had turned out far better than she had ever dared to hope would be the case. She really hoped to find me quite a comfort to her. I hope she did, for I paid dear for the honour. She was the most exacting woman I ever came across, and seemed to possess a faculty for prevading my whole life. She was always wanting me, or going to want me, or afraid she

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might want me. She would keep me hanging about the Court, sometimes for days together, without my being able to name a single thing I had actually done for her. It would take her the whole morning on occasions to decide whether I should stay to luncheon or go home for it.

'Perhaps you might stay to-day,' she would say. 'You were not here yesterday, and yet I hardly know. Your uncle was very irritable at breakfast this morning, and then, sometimes, it annoys him to see anyone. But perhaps you might amuse him. It is so difficult to tell how he will take things.'

Then if, when the luncheon hour was imminent, I urged for a positive decision, on the plea that I must have something to eat, and if I could not get it at the Court, must go back to the Deanery for it, she would turn pathetic, and wonder I could worry her when I knew how much she had to try and make her anxious. But if I was so desperately particular about my luncheon, I had better go back to the Deanery at once. I should get a much better one there than she could give me. She was quite aware the cooking at the Court was not to compare with that of the Deanery.

It was a sharp discipline, but I manfully strove to bear it as patiently as I could, for I was really very sorry for her. She made me the recipient of a heap of confidences, and I began by degrees to understand far more of the true position of affairs at the Court than I had ever done before. Through all Aunt Marion's discursive ramblings and confused irrelevancy, it was easy to see the thread of a very grave and serious danger, and my anxiety on Conrad's account became, very soon, quite as strong as her own. When one came to know Aunt Marion well, it was possible to trace a curious vein of accuracy running through the dislocated strata of her utterances. Get her to say clearly that a certain thing had been said or done within the sphere of her personal observations, and you might pretty well count upon the statement being correct. It was the discursive character of her mind, and her consequent tendency to mix up facts and inferences in inextricable confusion, which rendered it

so difficult to trace the vein of truth. By dint, however, of much laborious piecing together I succeeded in satisfying myself that the danger threatening Conrad was no imaginary one. Gilbert Wilbraham's design was evidently, as Aunt Marion averred, to artfully inflame Colonel L'Estrange's dislike to his son, and bring him at last to the belief that Conrad's health rendered him wholly unfit for the management of a large estate. That the ultimate goal at which the schemer aimed was to induce his uncle to make him, by will, heir to his whole property, subject to a handsome provision for Conrad, there was no doubt; but that he would rigidly aim at that goal did not follow. He was far too astute to hazard loss of the possible by striving too persistently after the impossible. His tactics would be regulated, as he went on, by the amount of success he achieved. At the present moment he appeared to be in the initiative stage of proceedings; fomenting his uncle's unnatural sentiments towards his son.

'Just look. This is the sort of thing,' Aunt Marion said to me one morning. 'This newspaper came yesterday. I happened to notice it was some weeks old, and it struck me there must be some reason for its being sent to your uncle. I pretended of course not to notice it, but I watched my opportunity, and got hold of it secretly.'

I took the paper, and found carefully marked, a case lately before the law courts, in which a confirmed invalid had been induced to leave his whole property to a designing housekeeper.

'That is the kind of thing I am sure he is constantly doing,' Aunt Marion went on, 'though I do not always succeed in finding it out. It keeps me perfectly wretched. My chief hope lies in Mr. Warren. By the bye, I have always forgotten to ask you, Vera, how do you like Mr. Warren?'

'I have never seen him,' I said.

'Never seen him. Why, how extraordinary!'

'We have not been very long at home, you know, and I believe he and Conrad agreed he should come as little as possible to the Court while you and Colonel L'Estrange were away.'

'Ah, true. That was very prudent. And he is away in the

north just now. His father has been very ill, I do not suppose he will be back for some time.'

Even when Mr. Warren did return I did not chance to meet him. I was curious to see him, and began to notice how oddly it happened that again and again we all but met, but yet missed each other. Once I actually heard him speaking, as I was sitting with Conrad. He was exchanging a few parting words with Colonel L'Estrange in the hall. It was a rich, deep toned, musical voice, which I was destined to hear on the next occasion, under somewhat unusual circumstances.

CHAPTER VII.

RASH CANDOUR.

AT length the longed-for hunting season opened. Swallow, in splendid condition, arrived at the Deanery stables, and thus the Fates forged another link in the chain of my destiny. I forthwith proceeded to inspect her, and at once perceived the imposition which had been practised on me. Not up to Lord Wichborough's weight! She would have carried him with ease through the severest day of the season. I had never seen her so close before, but as I noted the various indications about her of unusual strength, the veil which Lord Wichborough had sought to throw over the costliness of his gift became a very transparent one.

I met him on the way to the meet the first day I went out.

'Good,' he said. 'You suit each other to perfection. Don't get into mischief. Keep her well in hand at starting. She enjoys a run so thoroughly she is apt to go away a little too freely, and if it is a stiff one, it tells upon her towards the finish. Though I believe she could carry you at full stretch for the whole day.'

'Or you either,' I replied. 'I had never seen her very close, or I should not have been quite so easily taken in. You are far

too good to me, Lord Wichborough. I shall never feel quite happy about having her.'

He smiled, but there was a shade of sadness in the smile. 'I shall never have a child of my own to spoil, Vera,' he said, 'so I may as well spoil you. I should not like to have persuaded the Dean to let you hunt without taking care you were so mounted as to make you practically safe. It would only be some very extraordinary accident now that would bring you into any danger.'

That was a splendid run. The memory of it is strong upon me now; strong as is, I suppose, to most girls, the memory of a first ball, when everything has been propitious. It was a pretty stiff one too. Once or twice, I admit, Swallow made me draw a deep breath. I had ridden across country a great deal since the days of my childhood but never on a horse of her stamp. Lord Wichborough, the huntsman, and one or two others, were the only remnant of the field, besides myself, in at the death.

'Well, Stapleton,' Lord Wichborough said, as the huntsman cut off the brush, 'Miss Dormer has fairly won it to-day.'

'She has so, my lord, and I think it's nigh on the first time in my life I ever cut it off for a lady with hearty goodwill. If all ladies rode like Miss Dormer, the more of them in the field the better, I should say.'

That was a compliment. Stapleton was an eccentric character; a splendid huntsman, but possessed of a very violent temper, and a perfect hatred of women in the hunting field. I believe the point and candour of his remarks on the subject were something marvellous.

Swallow was quite fresh, so I started for a ten mile ride home in excellent spirits. Among other spectators at the meet, I had seen, in the distance, Edith Cranley, escorted by Captain Mason, one of the officers quartered at Wichborough, her engagement to whom had been lately announced. She had evidently no intention of being routed by Lord Wichborough, but she had taken care, or Captain Mason had done it, that she did not get in the way. I was riding leisurely along a broad

turf margin when they overtook me. Edith looked, I thought, a little spiteful. Perhaps it was only natural.

'Well, Vera,' she said, 'you have made a great splash to-day. I see you have got the brush. They say Stapleton almost swearing when he has to give it to a lady. Did he swear at you?'

'Not at all. He was very civil.'

'Ah! I suppose he knew better. Has Lord Wichborough really given you Swallow?'

'Yes, really.'

'Why, they say she is worth an immense sum'—'they say' figured a good deal in Edith Cranley's discourse—'but I don't see anything very wonderful about her. I have seen horses I admire much more.'

'With nice thin legs,' I suggested. It was spiteful, but I could not resist it.

'With nicer legs than Swallow's at any rate.'

'Don't be absurd, Edith,' put in Captain Mason, with evident annoyance. 'The mare is as near perfect as a horse can be. You will not see two such in fifty years. A hunter is not a park hack, remember.'

'Oh, I daresay she is wonderful. I wonder what Lady Wichborough thinks about your getting her, Vera?'

I knew what I thought of Edith's remark, that it was low and impertinent, so I took no notice. I could not wonder at her being a little spiteful. With her eager desire to attract attention, my chances must have been a bitter object of contemplation to her. After watching Swallow for a few moments, she said, with an oracular air—

'She certainly looks as if she could jump anything. I wish you would let me take her out one day.'

The audacity of the proposal almost took my breath away. The possible consequences of such a proceeding were appalling to contemplate. Edith had plenty of effrontery about her, and could put on a very bold face when danger was safely afar. But she had no more real nerve than a kitten.

'I could not do that,' I said.

'Why not? I would take good care of her.'

The suggestion was so absurd that involuntarily I laughed outright. 'The more important point,' I said, 'is, would she take good care of you?'

Edith coloured angrily. 'How conceited you are, Vera,' she said. 'I believe you think no one but yourself can ride.'

'That is nonsense, Edith,' I answered. 'You can ride well enough; but you have never had the sort of practice which would render you safe on a hunter like Swallow. You would lose your nerve, and the consequences might be very serious.'

Oh needless piece of candour! Never did my fatal propensity for speaking plainly out the whole truth recoil more surely and swiftly on my own head, than did that unlucky statement of fact. Edith grew more and more angry.

'Oh, of course,' she replied. 'No one but yourself can do anything in the field.'

'How can you be so childish?' I said, getting rather cross myself. 'It is a mere question of practice. You know I have had three times the amount of practice you have had.'

'Oh, yes. I quite understand. The girl whom Lord Wichenborough likes to see in the field must of course be beyond everyone else. But everyone knows how Lord Wichenborough raves against girls hunting, and I know it is a very general opinion in the neighbourhood that he did not do you any service, Vera, when he singled you out for such marked difference in treatment. I know mamma would not allow me to hunt with him. Captain Mason, I think we had better ride on. It is getting late.'

They rode on, Captain Mason not looking quite so happy as he might have done. That was the form Mrs. Cranley's maternal animosity had assumed, was it? I could not help feeling somewhat nettled, though I was amused as well. But that venom-tipped shaft of malice was a small part of the retribution which my inconvenient candour was doomed to bring upon me.

A frost stopped the hunting for a short time; and then, one fine breezy, grey morning, I rode up to Buckton Common to meet

Lord Wichborough. I was chatting with Mr. Mortimer, while we waited, when I suddenly heard Lord Wichborough say,

'Hang it if there isn't that Cranley girl again. Why, what sort of a brute is that she is on!'

I looked round. Edith and Captain Mason had just arrived. She was riding a tall, bony, rather awkward-looking horse, with a remarkably clumsy head.

'It is a horse of Mason's,' replied one of the officers in answer to Lord Wichborough.

'Does she mean following then?'

'I expect so.'

'Confound her,' I heard Lord Wichborough mutter.

There was a general laugh. 'I do not think you need trouble yourself, my lord,' continued the last speaker. 'I do not think you will see much of them. The brute is slow, and no great fencer. He has rather a nasty temper, though. Mason is a fool to put the girl on him. She is not much of a rider.'

An uneasy sensation began to steal over me, as the remembrance of my passage of arms with Edith came back to me. I felt certain she had joined the hunt on that horse as a sort of defiance to me. Why in the world had I explained my reasons for refusing to lend her Swallow? She was just the sort of rider who is in most danger in the hunting field; a girl who, on a good steady hunter, and well pioneered, could manage to keep a fair place in an easy run, but utterly ignorant of the more serious aspects of the sport. Because she could take a light fence well enough, she would conclude that whatever she saw Swallow and me do with apparent ease, she could do easily also. She possessed just enough knowledge to aid her vanity in landing her in some serious disaster. If she met with some bad accident, I should feel a great part of the blame was mine.

We were soon away, but I saw Edith was following my lead, and the pace was not, for the moment, severe enough to let me shake her off. There was nothing for it but an ignominous hunt for gaps and easy places. I saw her grin of triumph when she

found herself close to me at the first check. Lord Wichborough came up in wrath.

'Vera, what in the name of all that is marvellous are you at, zigzagging about that way? It is an insult to Swallow, and takes as much out of your horse, in the end, as riding straight.'

'I am afraid of Edith trying to follow me,' I said.

'Let her follow, and get a good cropper. The girl is a perfect nuisance. I'll be bound a good, heavy fall would take all the hunting out of her, and we should be rid of her.'

That might be; but I had no intention of decoying Edith into a disaster I could not control. However, by a quick dash I got away from her when we were off again, and was congratulating myself I had seen the last of her, when there came another check. The scent was not lying well, and the hounds seemed utterly at fault.

Swallow was watching them with the keenest intelligence. I knew she would not move until a warning note was heard, so slipping my reins over the pommel of the saddle, I took the opportunity of fastening my hat somewhat tighter. I had just finished doing so, when I heard Lord Wichborough shouting:

'Keep off the hounds, can't you.'

I looked up. There was the luckless Edith in trouble again. Her horse was just one of those ill-conditioned animals which only a first-rate rider could have controlled; and was probably irritated by her unskilful handling. I believe she was determined to be in at the death if she could, and thought the right thing, under all circumstances, was to be as close to the hounds as possible. At any rate, there she was, almost amongst them, with her horse dancing about in a way most perilous to them, and irritating to a degree no huntsman could be expected to stand.

What happened I cannot positively say, but it has always been my conviction that Stapleton, losing all command of his temper, under cover of a lash at a refractory dog, gave Edith's horse a sharp cut with his whip. At any rate the horse made a sudden bolt. At first I felt only inclined to laugh, expecting to see her pull him up in a few moments. But I very soon saw the case

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was serious, and then I grew cold with horror. I saw the horse was running away in right good earnest, and I saw the direction he had taken.

We were on a small common, entirely enclosed by cultivated land, save at two places ; one, where a short narrow lane gave exit on to the high road ; the other, where a broad strip of grass land led down, between hedges, to the very brink of a deep stone quarry. It was in fact the road by which carts reached the quarry, turning sharp to the right at its very edge, and descending at a slant a steep incline to get to the entrance. It was for this strip of grass Edith's horse was making. If he reached the brink of the quarry, he must go over. No power on earth could save them. And she, losing what little presence of mind she possessed, was really making no effort to stop or guide him. She was simply clutching the reins, and screaming.

Lord Wichborough saw the danger as soon as I did, and drove his spurs into his horse, shouting : ' Head her off, for God's sake ! ' He knew he had no chance of reaching her in time himself.

There were but two people anywhere near her, Captain Mason and myself. I heard something like a groan from him, and glanced round. Alas, for all the use he could be he might as well have been in the next county. He, too, had taken advantage of the check to do something to his saddle, and was standing on the ground beside his horse, always rather a troublesome one to mount, with the girths hanging. All in a moment the full amount of my own responsibility for what was happening flashed upon me. In a few minutes poor Edith, vain and silly, perhaps, but young, bright, and pretty, would meet a horrible death, almost before the eyes of a man who loved her, all because my careless outspokenness had excited in her a spirit of rash bravado.

It all happened, of course, in less time than it takes me to write a single sentence. In a moment I had caught up my reins, and laid Swallow down to her utmost speed. I could not head Edith off, but I knew I could soon overtake her. Whether I

could then do what I meditated was another thing. I had once seen a groom do it. I heard Lord Wichborough shouting something, and I caught my own name. But I neither heard nor cared to hear what he said. I was conscious of nothing but the ungoverned horse and helpless rider.

The great lumbering brute was doing his best then—or his worst—but he had not a chance. Swallow gained upon him at every stride, going steady as a rock, the beauty, and answering to every touch of my hand, as if she knew that life or death hung upon her speed and intelligence.

I was close upon the runaway when we came between the hedges, and keeping him well away on my off side, I gradually closed in. By the time we were neck and neck I was close beside him. Another stride and my arm was on a line with his head. Dropping my whip, and gripping my saddle with all my strength, I leaned over, and caught him firmly by the bit, sharply pulling up Swallow as I did so.

I had stopped him, but I believe only the strength born of desperation enabled me to do it. At any rate, I was very sure I could not hold him long. He tried to plunge, and that wretched girl only sat and screamed.

'Get off,' I gasped. 'I can't hold him.'

There was plenty of room for her to slip off, for the sudden wrench at his head had made her horse swing out nearly at right angles from mine. But of course she blundered, came down upon her habit, and stumbled heavily against Swallow's flank. Swallow, excited already by her senseless screaming, swerved. At the same moment the other horse gave a tug. Like a fool I held on, was dragged over the saddle, felt a sensation of everything giving way, and of a blow on the head, and knew nothing more.

The next thing of which I became conscious was of a voice which seemed in some way familiar to me saying, 'She is coming round. Try and get her to drink a little brandy and water.'

I felt a cold rim pressed gently to my lips, and obediently swallowed some of the contents of the cup. They revived me,

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and I opened my eyes. Lord Wichborough was kneeling on his right knee, supporting me against his left knee and shoulder, and was just handing back a silver cup to another man in a hunting coat, who was kneeling in front of me, with a mask in his hand. I made an effort to rise.

'Lie still for a moment, my child,' Lord Wichborough said. 'You will be better directly.'

I obeyed, and then became conscious of a sobbing and wailing going on not far off. It brought back to me a recollection of what had happened, and I started up.

'Oh, where is Edith?' I exclaimed; 'is she safe?'

'Safe, yes,' said Lord Wichborough, 'and making fuss enough for ten women.'

'You may let this go now,' said the other sportsman, gently taking hold of something I was still tightly clutching in my right hand. I looked down. It was the broken head piece of Edith Cranley's horse.

'What became of him?' I asked.

'Went over the quarry and was killed on the spot,' said Lord Wichborough.

I was sitting up on the grass by this time, and was quite collected, although I felt very shaky. I saw one of Lord Wichborough's grooms holding Swallow at a little distance, while Lord Wichborough's horse and one belonging apparently to his companion were in charge of another.

'Oh, Lord Wichborough,' I said, 'I am being a trouble to you after all. I have spoiled your day. Where is Jackson? I am sure I could ride quietly home now.'

'Faith I have had hunting enough for to-day,' he said, 'and you are not going to ride home. Jackson is gone for the carriage. They can bring it to the cottage yonder. Do you think you can walk so far?'

'Of course I can,' I said, determined that I would. 'But I tottered about in rather a helpless fashion when I got on to my feet.'

'Hold up your habit,' Lord Wichborough said. 'Now, Warren, put your arm round her.'

He passed his own arm round me from the other side, and, almost carried between them, I pursued a somewhat devious course to the cottage. 'Warren.' That was how the voice came to be familiar to me then.

'How about riding?' Lord Wichborough said with a smile when they had deposited me in a chair.

I shook my head. I felt rather sick and faint.

'Does your head pain you, Miss Dormer?' asked Mr. Warren's deep, musical voice. 'I fear you got a kick.'

'I know I did,' I said, 'but it was not a severe one. I am not in pain, but I feel a good deal shaken. I do wish you would not let me keep you both here. You might pick up the hunt yet. I can sit here quite well till the carriage comes.'

'My dear child,' replied Lord Wichborough, 'Mr. Warren and I have had as bad a shaking as you have. You may depend neither of us will do more than ride quietly home when we have seen you off. Eh, Warren?'

Mr. Warren made an expressive gesture. 'I would not look at another fence to-day for fifty pounds,' he said. Then glancing out of the window, he added in a lower tone, 'Miss Cranley is coming.'

'Devil take her,' Lord Wichborough muttered, as he strode out of the room.

'Oh, where is dear Vera?' I heard Edith exclaiming, in a sort of a hysterically excited voice. 'Is she hurt? I must see her.'

'Miss Dormer is not hurt, at least not seriously,' Lord Wichborough answered, in a cold, haughty tone, 'but she is a good deal shaken. You cannnot see her, Miss Cranley.'

'Oh, Lord Wichborough, I want to thank her for saving my life! Darling Vera! it was so brave of her. And I am sure she would like me to sit with her till the carriage comes for us.'

'Miss Dormer is under my charge,' replied Lord Wichborough, 'and you are not going to see her. I think you are under a mis-

take about the carriage also. The carriage is coming for Miss Dormer, but for no one else.'

'Really, Lord Wichborough,' put in Captain Mason, in a somewhat impertinent tone of remonstrance, 'this is most extraordinary. I am sure Miss Dormer will gladly give Miss Cranley a seat in her carriage. How else is she to get home?'

'That, sir,' replied Lord Wichborough, whose anger was evidently waxing fast, 'is your affair. You are responsible for the whole of the business, seeing it was you put Miss Cranley on a horse she was perfectly unfit to manage. You can make your own arrangements for getting her home, and be thankful you have nothing worse to——' he checked himself abruptly. 'You have only paid the penalty of your folly by losing your horse. But had it not been for the most consummate daring, and one of the finest pieces of riding I ever saw, this business would have ended very differently. Miss Dormer is heavily shaken, and I intend that she shall remain perfectly quiet, and return home undisturbed. After this very unpleasant incident, I feel myself further at liberty to remark, as master of the pack, that I trust this may be the last time the whole arrangements of the day may be upset, and valuable lives endangered, by the determination of incompetent riders to join in a sport for which they are wholly unfit.'

With that he turned abruptly, and re-entered the cottage. The whole colloquy had been perfectly audible, and though I was sorry for Edith, I was very grateful to him. I knew quite well how she would have chattered, describing all her sensations, and playing the heroine all the way home. It really would have been more than I could have borne.

Lying back in an arm-chair which the quarry-man's wife had brought me, I had been quietly examining Mr. Warren's face during the dialogue outside. He was sitting on a small table close to the window, looking out, and occasionally smiling a little to himself. It was a very attractive face, at least to me. Not actually handsome. I fancy most people would have called it a very ordinary one. But it was a face to be trusted—a face

which in danger or emergency it brings a sense of confidence and security to see near you. He was a tall, powerful, well-made man, and looked remarkably well in his hunting dress.

A significant glance passed between the two men as Lord Wichborough re-entered, and twirling round a chair, sat down across it, and resting his arms on the back, said with a deep drawn breath :

'I feel better.'

'I am glad to hear it, my lord,' said Mr. Warren, dryly. 'I hope Miss Cranley and Captain Mason feel the same.'

Lord Wichborough threw back his head with a short quick laugh. 'Well, you know,' he said, 'it was the bursting of a pent up volcano. I cannot tell you the nuisance that girl has been. This is the first time she has tried to follow, but she was for ever coming to the meets, and getting in the way. She lamed one of our best dogs last season, just when we could least spare him.'

They wisely took no notice of me, but continued chatting until we saw the carriage drive up, with Waters and Murray, and a perfect regiment of pillows inside. Waters came in, looking very white, but perfectly composed. A glance at me, however, seemed to reassure her.

'I see you are not much hurt, my dear, only shaken. It was so fortunate the Dean had gone out before Jackson arrived, so he will be spared all alarm. I think, my lord,' she added, turning to Lord Wichborough, 'we had better go at once. Miss Vera will be the better of being quiet at home as soon as may be.'

I was soon settled among the pillows. We had to cross the common at a foot's pace, and as we turned on to the road, I saw Lord Wichborough and Mr. Warren riding slowly after us, evidently on the way home. Edith Cranley had achieved notoriety that day, at least, and most effectually overturned all the arrangements. She, I believe, had to walk nearly a mile to a farmhouse, and wait there while Captain Mason rode into Wichborough to get the carriage for her.

CHAPTER VIII.

SIMON'S COMMISSION.

WHAT an uproar there was in Wichborough the next day ! I do not think the door bell at the Deanery had ten minutes' peace the whole afternoon. Edith Cranley must have been in her glory, and in her secret heart must, I think, have thought the risk, now it was well over, fully repaid by the splendid chance afforded to her of playing the heroine. The tree had borne its legitimate fruits. Sham Bohemianism had produced a sham triumph, which true Bohemianism would have regarded as a very humiliating fiasco. I imagine, however, that in her thrilling descriptions of her miraculous escape there were blank spaces where Lord Wichborough should have come in, and that of her subsequent interview with him the world heard nothing. Captain Mason was not, it appeared, communicative on the subject to anyone, but his admission that Lord Wichborough had peremptorily refused to allow Edith to return in the Deanery carriage aroused quite a storm in both Close and town. Lord Wichborough's conduct was pronounced to be quite brutal. Of course, after such a frightfully narrow escape, Miss Cranley should have been the first person considered.

I heard it all from Waters, who was in the town herself in the course of the day. I was glad to remain quietly in the house.

'Never was such a chatter, my dear,' she said. 'No one can talk of anything else. Everyone blames Captain Mason very much for putting Miss Cranley on that horse. But he says he has had the horse for two years, and that he never saw him show the slightest inclination to run away. He cannot think what took him.'

I thought I knew pretty well what took him. But I was not going to say anything.

'People say,' continued Waters, that Mrs. Cranley is as much at fault as anyone ; that she was so angry at Lord Wichborough encouraging you to hunt, and giving you Swallow, that she was

as eager as anyone Miss Cranley should go out on a showy sort of horse, that she thought would attract a good deal of attention. But the ladies in the Close and town may chatter as they like, and make a heroine out of Miss Cranley,' continued Waters in a tone of triumph, 'it's about you, my dear, all the gentlemen that belong to the hunt are talking. They all say they couldn't have believed a girl like you could have done such a thing.'

'Most girls like me are not allowed to roam about like young savages, as Miss Lambert used to say; that just makes all the difference,' I replied, with a weary sigh, as I thought of the 'damnable iteration' with which every possible aspect of my action would be forced upon me for the next ten days at least.

Of course I had to promise to see Mrs. Cranley and Edith, a refusal would have been so horribly ungracious; so I prepared myself, as best I might, to stem the torrent of gush in which I should soon be struggling. But by rare good fortune Lord Wichborough himself arrived about ten minutes before they were expected. He was more moved than I had ever seen him. He took me in his arms and kissed me fondly.

'You little gipsy,' he said as he released me, 'what do you mean by frightening me out of ten years of my life? That is the way you reward me for giving you the best hunter in my stables. I have a great mind to send for Swallow back again to-morrow.'

'Surely I could not have made a better use of her?' I said.

'Humph,' he growled. 'To tell you the honest truth, Vera, I would rather have seen that girl go clean over the quarry, than have seen you in the danger you were in for a few minutes. Your spirit and splendid riding carried you through, but no girl has the physical strength to attempt such a thing without very great danger. I can tell you Warren and I were shaking like a couple of old women when we got up to you. We were both of us glad of a good stiff glass of brandy before we remounted to ride home.'

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tide of gratitude and adulation, but it congealed in a moment at sight of Lord Wichborough. His inquiries after Edith, a little too transparently indifferent in tone, I must allow, were answered with a freezing haughtiness of manner, of which he seemed to be most provokingly unconscious.

'Which do you feel most disagreeable effects from, Miss Cranley,' he gravely asked, 'the fright and the tumble, or the screaming and hysterics ?'

'I.....Lord Wichborough.....I really don't understand.'

'I mean, you know,' he said, with a most innocent air, 'that I never heard anyone scream as you did, and I never saw anyone in hysterics before. It struck me that both must be monstrously fatiguing. Hysterics don't matter so much, but you really shouldn't scream that way, where horses are in question. Swallow is an exceptional horse, and was under the hand of an exceptional rider. But upon my word I am not sure that I could have brought her near enough to anyone screaming at that rate, to be of any use. You should either give up screaming, or give up riding, Miss Cranley.'

Edith grew crimson, and Mrs. Cranley muttered something under her breath, so evidently monosyllabic that I do not see what it could have been save 'brute.'

They both made gallant efforts to hold their own, but it was useless. Lord Wichborough still with his preternaturally innocent air, kept dropping in with most exasperating remarks, until, at last, Mrs. Cranley, rising rather abruptly, said they had an engagement, and must not linger; and after promising with meaning emphasis to come again soon, they took their departure.

Lord Wichborough broke into a hearty laugh the moment they were gone.

'Fairly routed, Vera,' he said.

'It was too bad,' I replied.

'Not a bit. The woman has been declaring she would show me whether her daughter should not hunt as well as you, and you have been near paying the cost with your life. I will never

forgive her. Now mind, you monkey,' he continued, as he rose to go, ' if ever you give me such a fright again I will have Swallow back in a twinkling, if I have to charge you with having stolen her.'

Up to this time I had been spared Aunt Marion's comments, as she had been confined to the house with a severe cold. But hearing the next morning that she was better, I ordered Flash to be saddled, who, enjoying a robust old age, was still a very desirable mount for a quiet stroll, and took myself to the Chase, to pay one of my occasional visits to Simon. He was growing very infirm, and increasingly rheumatic.

Not thus, however, did I escape the stock subject. Simon had heard of the adventure, and I had to give him details. Fortunately, however, his interest in the exploit was cooled down by anxiety to speak to me about his own affairs.

'I was wanting to see you,' he said. 'I want you to do summut for me.'

'What is that?'

'Well, Miss, you see, I be getting very bad. I don't think as I'll trouble anyone much longer. I aint fit to do for myself, so Sally's been to Mr. Warren, and he's given leave for her and her man to come and stop here as long as I last, and then they'll pull the old place down. Sally's been a good lass to me, but her man's a bad one, he is. Now, I've got a bit of money saved by. It aint much, but it will help Sally when I'm gone, and I want her to get it without her man finding out aught about it. Sally doesn't know aught about it, nor he neither, and I want you to take it and keep it. Then when I'm gone they'll turn over the place, and find nothing, and when Joe's satisfied there aint nothing more than the old furniture, if you'd come, some day, and just give it quietly to Sally, then she'd get the use of it. They'll get leave to stay a week or two after I'm gone, just to settle up things.'

I readily undertook the commission, and forthwith a small, dirty canvas bag, securely tied up, was confided to my charge.

'Thank you kindly, my dear,' the old man said. 'I'll rest

easier now that's done. Poor Sally, she'll have a time of it when I'm away. I never wanted her to marry him, but lasses will have their way.'

'Is he very bad?' I asked.

'A downright bad one.'

'Is he a poacher?'

'Poacher! yes, and worse than that I doubt. As long as money's to be got, he don't stop at how. He's been afraid to go too far while I was here, but when I'm gone it'll be different. If he'll put a halter round his neck, and that's just what he'll be like to do, it'll be the best thing that can happen for Sally.'

I had no reason to doubt the truth of this curious parental conclusion. I faithfully promised that Sally should get the money without a soul knowing anything of the transaction, and then remounting I turned up the glade down which I had ridden at such headlong speed, and with such startling results, in the days of Flash's uproarious youth.

I was riding along very quietly, when Flash gave a start. Pigs or gipsies? I said to myself. Then I caught the sound of a horse's hoof, and in a few moments Mr. Warren overtook me.

'I am glad to see you out, Miss Dormer,' he said. 'I hope it means that you have quite got over your shaking.'

'Quite, thank you,' I replied. And then we both involuntarily laughed. I could not but detect myself, the moment the words were spoken, the tone of impatient weariness which the mere mention of the subject had caused me, quite unintentionally, to assume.

'Ah,' Mr. Warren said, 'opportunities are sadly injudiciously distributed in this world. One could easily foretell you would not care to play the heroine. Miss Cranley seems to find the second place a sort of Elysium.'

'How could you foretell that?'

'By the way you manage a horse. Such a rider as you are never cares for self-advertisement. But to change the subject. Pray, is that the renowned Flash?'

'What remains of him.'

'And that is worth a great deal. He must have been a splendid pony.'

'How did you hear anything of him?'

'Chiefly from old Simon. He was telling me the other day of your adventure with the gipsies.'

'I have just been there,' I said. 'He tells me you have given leave for his daughter and her husband to go there.'

'Yes, most unwillingly. But I talked over the matter with Colonel L'Estrange, and found him averse to a refusal. The old man was a good, steady workman, and cannot, I think, last very long. It would be cruel to force him into the workhouse.'

'Is his son-in-law really so bad?'

'A most uncommon rascal. In truth, had not all the conditions of traffic altered so much, I should have strongly urged Colonel L'Estrange to refuse. The Haunted Copse is perilously easy of access from Simon's cottage, and I do not believe Mr. Joe Collier's establishment there would at all have tended to decrease the risk of murders in that horrible hole.'

'Is it so bad as that?'

'I think so. But he has never been found out. There was an attempt at robbery, not murder, there while you were abroad, and I have a strong suspicion that Mr. Collier had something to do with it.'

I was giving but scant attention to what he said. My thoughts had gone off to the state of affairs at Wichenborough Court, and some mental queries which the present was an excellent opportunity of getting settled.

'Have you been at the Court to-day?' I asked.

'I have just come from there. Poor Mrs. L'Estrange is in a terrible state of nervous fidget. Her heavy cold has depressed her, and moreover, there are rumours abroad of a visit from Mr. Wilbraham.'

'I wanted to speak to you about that,' I said. 'Aunt Marion makes me the confidante of all her anxieties now. She is always falling back on her confidence in you. What I cannot under-

stand is, how you could in any way hinder Colonel L'Estrange from making a will in Mr. Wilbraham's favour.'

'I could not do so at all. My importance in the case springs from two sources. One, that understanding fully the state of affairs, I can often avoid irritating Colonel L'Estrange against his son; the other, that in our many and complicated business transactions, especially considering that Colonel L'Estrange's brother's will, under which he succeeded, was a peculiar one, it is very improbable that he would make a will without the fact coming to my knowledge. Of course I should not know what were its provisions. But so long as I see no reason to suspect that he has made one, the presumption is strong that he has done nothing of the kind.'

'Is he bad enough to disinherit his son?'

Mr. Warren shook his head. 'I don't know about the badness. I am convinced, from watching him, that how sane soever he may appear, some brain disease must be the cause of his eccentricities. The great danger in the case is—' he paused a moment, then added, 'I am speaking confidentially, Miss Dorner. It would not be well Mrs. L'Estrange should hear the facts. But the truth is Mr. Wilbraham is an absolutely desperate man. He is heavily involved. Some of his entanglements are unquestionably of a sort it would not be convenient should be generally known. He is heir to his uncle, Sir Brock, a very honourable man, with absolute power over everything save his title, and a small part of his property. If he got any hint of his nephew's position it would be fatal to Mr. Wilbraham's interests. Sir Brock is a much older man than Colonel L'Estrange, but exceedingly sound and robust, whereas Colonel L'Estrange's life is certainly not likely to be a very long one. Wilbraham may hold out his time, but unless he can lay his hands on a great deal of money, it is almost impossible he could hold out for the probable length of Sir Brock's life. He is therefore much in the position of regarding Colonel L'Estrange's fortune as his only salvation from absolute ruin, both financial and social. A man in such desperate straits is a dangerous antagonist.'

'And if Colonel L'Estrange makes no will?'

'His son will succeed to everything, as heir at law. Mrs. L'Estrange is provided for by her marriage settlement.'

'Then the object at which to aim is to prevent Colonel L'Estrange making any will at all.'

'Undoubtedly; and the one point in our favour is, that he has some superstition about doing it. It is a case of his superstition against his enmity towards his son and the arts of Mr. Wilbraham, a most anxious position of affairs, as you may see, and one with which I fear Mrs. L'Estrange is very unfit to cope. There is some undercurrent in her mind too, which I cannot fathom; some complex feeling, which makes her seem sometimes to pull one way, sometimes the other. I am very glad I chanced to meet you to-day. I wanted to put you on your guard on this point, also to ask you if I may consider myself free of the Deanery? It is quite of as much consequence that I should be able to communicate with Mrs. L'Estrange without any suspicion of the fact being excited, as it was that Bartlett should receive and answer the notes you used to carry; and once or twice I have had my suspicions aroused as to whether some of the Court servants are not in Wilbraham's pay. Mrs. L'Estrange is so random in all her ways that, under the circumstances, I should greatly prefer communicating with her verbally, rather than by letter.'

'You will almost always find me at home before luncheon,' I said, 'and if you leave your horse at the inn, and walk round by the path at the back of the almshouse, you can get into the Deanery grounds quite unobserved, by a little gate near the garden. It is always unlocked during the day.'

'And the Dean will not disapprove?'

I hesitated a moment. Mr. Warren shot a keen glance at me.

'If you think the Dean would see any objection, Miss Dormer,' he said, 'I dare say we could make some better arrangement. Perhaps I was a little indiscreet in making such a suggestion, I ought to have remembered that Mrs. Dormer is not alive.'

He spoke with a frank candour which would have impelled any girl, not a hopeless prude, to do the same.

'My father will not have the least objection,' I said. 'He is far too anxious about Aunt Marion and Conrad, and takes much too little heed of Close gossip. Still, they do watch the Deanery, I believe, just because I have no mother, and they have all prophesied dire results from my gipsy habits. I think if you were seen much about the house there would be a great deal of chatter. If I knew Mrs. Warren it would be different.'

'A chatter would just defeat our object. It would be sure to reach the Court. But, you know, Mrs. Warren cannot take the initiative.'

'Do you think she is at home now? May I go with you and call upon her?'

'I am sure she is at home, and will be very pleased if you will do so. Of course, she knows very little of the state of affairs; but she does know enough to understand the necessities of the case.'

We had just reached the end of the glade, and turned in the direction of the house. A groom came forward and took the horses, and Mr. Warren led the way to the drawingroom. No one was there.

'I think Mrs. Warren is probably upstairs,' he said. 'If you sit down I will go and look for her.'

I obeyed, and as soon as I was alone gazed about me in blank amazement. Handsome but massive design, rich material, and subdued colouring, were the general characteristics of the drawingrooms within the Cathedral precincts, and as yet I had but seen little of any others. Anything like Mrs. Warren's drawingroom I had never dreamed of. On a substructure of really good solid furniture was superimposed a display of tawdry decoration which almost took my breath away, and which could only find favour with an inborn and ineradicable vulgarity. Dreadful landscapes, in coloured chalk, framed in flashy gilt frames, were plastered all over the walls. Gaudy Berlin wool-work flaunted in all directions every brilliant colour that dyers

had ever produced. A rather mangy looking stuffed dog glared horribly from under a chiffonier, which supported a wonderful structure of shells and sand, under a glass shade. There were cheap imitations of Dresden china figures on the chimneypiece, and heaven knows what other abominations crowding the pantheon of ugliness. I had not half finished my inspection when the presiding genius of the place entered.

She came alone. Often since have I wondered if her husband had not the courage to introduce her. She was the fitting complement to that room; the very incarnation of irredeemable vulgarity; a small, rather neat looking woman, with pale eyes and complexion, and sandy hair. She was well dressed according to the fashion of the time. Her French merino gown was of a rather crude shade, but it was well made; her large worked collar was handsome, and her showy gold brooch and chain were not specially remarkable in these days. It was the woman herself gave to her clothes an aspect they would not have worn on another woman.

The intensity of that woman's vulgarity has always seemed to me most strongly shown in the fact that it made itself so prominent in spite of her extreme quietness and self-possession. She was very quiet, devoid of animation, and showing little interest in anything. The expression of her face was rather listless and discontented; a fair index, I soon discovered, of the state of her mind.

Of course she began on the hateful subject. Had I quite got over the accident? She was sure it must have been a dreadful sight. She had never seen Mr. Warren so much upset. Really, when she saw him ride up to the house so early in the day, and looking so upset, she had trembled so, she could hardly go and meet him. She was sure something dreadful had happened. In desperation I cut her short.

'How do you like this country, Mrs. Warren? I have always thought the Manor charming.'

'Oh dear, I do not like it at all. Such a tumble-down old place. I can't think why Mr. Warren came here. I like new

houses, where everything is nice and fresh and bright, and you don't have lots of rats and things. And I have always been used to a great deal of society, and friends dropping in. I find it very dull.'

'Do you read much?'

'No, I am no great reader. Besides I can't get books. I'm afraid to drive myself, so I cannot often go to Wichborough. As soon as the spring comes I shall take the children and go and stay with my mother. She lives just on the outskirts of York, a charming place, plenty of society. I daresay I shall stay there all the summer.'

'That will make it rather dull for Mr. Warren, will it not?'

'I cannot help that. I daresay he will go into lodgings in Wichborough. He cannot expect me to stay here alone in this dull old house.'

I very soon brought my visit to a close, courageously, however, inviting her to return it by coming with her husband on an early day to lunch at the Deanery, when I would drive her home. Whether I liked her or not made no difference to the importance of Wichborough knowing we were on visiting terms.

I rode away in mute bewilderment. Adrian Warren and his wife seemed to have been designed by nature to intensify each other's characteristics by contrast. His refinement—by no means the superficial refinement of the well-trained men of society, but the inborn natural refinement of a noble nature, increased by intellectual culture, against her innate vulgarity, not of manner, but of mind and sentiment. Each stood out in sharper outline from the mere accident of mutual contact. How came he ever to marry her?

With that question I concluded a recital to my father of my afternoon's proceedings.

'I should think,' he said, 'you are about the fiftieth person I have heard ask that question. I believe it is invariably asked by everyone who makes their acquaintance. The mystery to everyone is, what Warren really feels. He behaves admirably. He must feel her a sort of discredit to him, but not a soul can

trace a sign of any such sentiment. I am glad of the arrangement you made, Vera. I never believed your gipsy ways would injure your discretion. I am glad to perceive I judged rightly. All the same, I am not sorry you have fixed a day for Mrs. Warren's visit when I have to be out. She is more than I can stand.'

'So you make her over to me.'

'My dear, that is a part of the burden of life properly appertaining to woimen. You do not have to mediate in Chapter disputes, or endeavour to induce Lady Alicia not to treat the inferior clergy *de haut en bas*. You must take your share of life's troubles. By the bye, your aunt was here just after you went out, in a great fuss and fidget, wondering you had not been over. You are to be sure and go to the Court as early as possible to-morrow.'

With a heavy sigh I went off to change my habit.

CHAPTER IX.

SUPERSTITIOUS TERRORS.

IF I sighed over-night I groaned in the morning. A note from Aunt Marion was on the breakfast-table. I must come to the Court as soon as possible. She had a great deal to say to me. The news of the accident had made her quite ill, and Colonel L'Estrange was very restless, and kept her very anxious, and she had had letters which worried her. I knew what a morning with Aunt Marion meant under these circumstances. But though I groaned I did not go unwillingly. I knew my sufferings meant a respite for Conrad.

'My dear Vera,' she began, the moment I appeared, 'how could you be so thoughtless? You might have been sure I should call yesterday. And never to have come here, when you knew how anxious I should be. I never slept a wink after hearing of the accident. I am sure I entreated your father not

to allow you to hunt. And that wild horse of Lord Wichborough's! One would think he wanted to get you killed. It makes me shudder to see you on it. I always felt sure there would be some bad accident. Sit down and tell me exactly what happened.'

I passively obeyed, describing all that had passed in the most circumstantial manner. Then she burst forth.

'It is just what I have always told you. You are so reckless and impetuous. What business had you to interfere? And you see you only did harm instead of good. What good could come of pulling a horse's headpiece off? And falling off in that way. The horse might have trodden on you, and you would have been killed. And he would certainly have fallen, and Edith would probably have been seriously hurt also. You see what comes of being so masculine. You should never interfere with horses. They should always be left to grooms who understand them. However, it is a mercy it is no worse. But I wanted to tell you. Such an extraordinary thing! Your uncle is quite taken up about it.'

'Colonel L'Estrange?' I said—I never called him uncle.

'Yes, my dear, and you must be sure, when you see him, to tell him all about it. It will keep him in a good humour. He has been most trying lately. And I have heard that Gilbert Wilbraham is coming next week. It has upset me dreadfully. You must come and stay here while he is here, Vera. I will speak to your father about it. I feel so afraid he is coming to try and get your uncle to make his will. You might help us to watch. They would not suspect you.'

'I met Mr. Warren yesterday, in the Chase,' I said, and he was speaking to me about Colonel L'Estrange. Is it true, Aunt Marion, as he seemed to think, that Colonel L'Estrange has some sort of superstitious dread of making a will?'

'Yes, it is quite true. I am sure, years ago, I tried by every means in my power to induce him to make one. When I married, his elder brother was still alive, and of course my marriage settlement was not what it should be now he has all



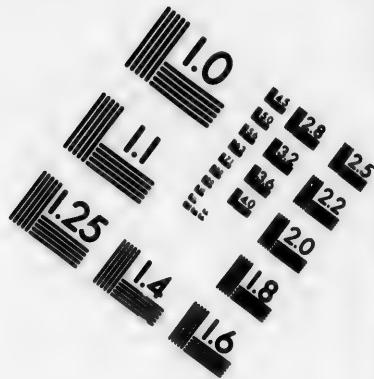
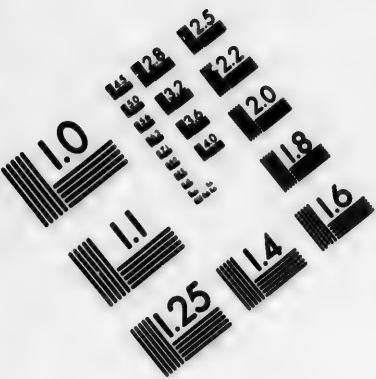
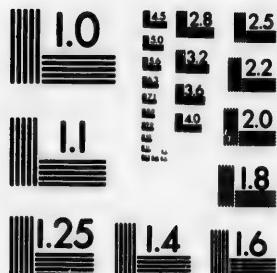
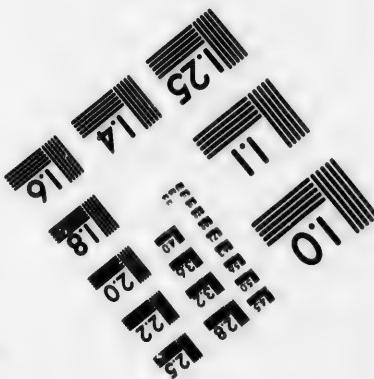


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the property. It was quite understood, if he succeeded, it should be supplemented by will. But I could never induce him to make one. He has some notion. I think a gipsy once told him he would die if he made a will. So silly—of him I mean. Of course everyone must die. What has making a will to do with it ?'

'But,' I urged, 'why do you not make use of that superstition ? Put in his way every story you can get hold of about people having died as soon as they had made their wills. You might frighten him out of it altogether. He would never make a will just to please Mr. Wilbraham, if he thought it would be his own death.'

'How can you be so foolish, Vera ? Of course I do not want him frightened out of making a will. I want him to make one, only not one dictated by Gilbert. How else am I to be sure of a proper jointure ? It would be very mortifying for me to have to live in a different style from what I have been accustomed to here.'

'How can you talk in that way, Aunt Marion ? Of course, if there is no will, Conrad would succeed to everything, save what is already secured to you. Are you afraid to trust your own son ?'

'I like to have things properly settled. One can never tell what may happen. Who could have thought, when I married, that Colonel L' Estrange would ever turn out as he has done ?' Conrad might marry some designing woman who would set him against me.'

'Aunt Marion ! And you would let such a preposterous idea hinder you from using the best chance you have of saving Conrad's inheritance for him ?'

Aunt Marion put on her most impressive air of injured dignity.

'I think, Vera, Conrad's mother has some claim to consideration, though you do not seem to think so.'

I held my peace. What could I say ? I should like to have told her she was a selfish old wretch, but it would have been both rude and injudicious. A fresh and very grave aspect of affairs at Wicborough Court had dawned upon me. I had

lighted quite unexpectedly on that undercurrent which had puzzled Mr. Warren. There was not only Colonel L'Estrange's mental perversity, and Gilbert Wilbraham's villainy to be thwarted, there was Aunt Marion's selfishness, partially, at least, playing into Mr. Wilbraham's hands. And Conrad's own mother feared to trust him! Conrad, always so generous, so true, so strictly honourable? The bare thought made me furious. I had sense enough to hold my tongue, but it was hard work.

I had still to listen to a long harangue about what she wished and thought and feared. As almost every fresh suggestion contradicted her last, the discussion was, as was usual where Aunt Marion was in question, exceedingly barren of all practical results. At last, to my great relief, she suddenly remembered that she had some shopping to do before luncheon, and had ordered her pony chair at half-past twelve. She suggested that I should go and see Conrad before I left.

He greeted me with his beautiful smile. 'Well, mad-cap,' he said, 'have you applied for first place in a troupe of equestrian performers?'

'Oh, Conrad,' I exclaimed, 'don't begin upon that hateful subject. If you only knew how sick of it I am.'

'And how weary do you suppose I am of the subject you have been sent to discuss with me?'

'I am afraid you have been having a time of it. I see Aunt Marion is very nervous and excitable.'

'Yes. Poor mother. She has no capacity for taking things quietly. In good truth, Vera, but for her sake, I think I should say let everything run its chance. I am but a frail structure at best, hardly worth all this fret and worry. But I cannot bear to think of being deprived of the power to make a fit and proper provision for my mother.'

I felt myself redden, with that strange feeling, almost a sense of shame, which such a contrast excites. I was glad I was sitting with my back to the light. 'But it would not be right to let things go, Conrad,' I said. 'There must be something

wrong with your father's brain. For his sake you ought to try your utmost to prevent what would be a stain on his memory.'

Conrad was silent for a moment. Then he asked—

'Where do you get your good sense from, Vera?'

'I did not know I had shown any particularly good sense.'

'Well, there are not many girls of your age to whom it would have occurred to put the subject in that light.'

'Oh, if you mean that, I got it from Mr. Charlottle. I don't know exactly how it applies in this case, but it was he taught me always to try and see things in their true light. I mean not to let your own wishes or prejudices interfere with your judgment. I am sure if one does that, one generally sees things in a different light from what most people do.'

I stayed chatting with Conrad for some time. I do not know if it was because I was indignant on his account, but certainly he seemed to be more good and noble and lofty in all his sentiments than ever. I left him almost viciously determined that if human effort could compass it, I would hinder the wresting from him of his inheritance.

I think it was my discovery of that morning made me a really important factor in the case. Other people had given Aunt Marion credit for disinterested devotion to her son, and bent their efforts to aiding her. I, in detecting the underlying selfishness which vitiated her action, had discovered the importance of merely using her as a tool, as far as she could safely be used, and of striving to act upon Colonel L'Estrange unsuspected by her.

I was revolving the subject as I walked slowly down towards the river, when I came unexpectedly on Colonel L'Estrange, sitting on a seat in a sheltered spot, apparently enjoying the unusual mildness of the weather.

'Oh, Vera,' he said. 'Have you been to see your aunt?'

'Yes. I have been chatting with her and Conrad. She is gone out now.'

'Well, come and sit down for a little. I shall be thankful for an agreeable companion. It is not altogether cheerful to pass

one's life with a fidget and an invalid. Besides I want to hear about this great performance of yours. I used to be a great horseman myself, you know.'

I knew nothing of the kind. On the contrary I had every reason to believe that Colonel L'Estrange had been about as bad a rider as a man could possibly be. However, I meekly sat down, and went over the wretched story again.

'By Jove,' he exclaimed, 'it was a most daring thing to do. I only wish there was a little more of that sort of quality in the family. I can't imagine how you came to think of it, or have the strength to do it.'

'I suppose it was the strength of desperation. It was the only chance of saving her life.'

'Not a specially valuable one.'

'One doesn't think of that when one sees the danger,' I said, consoling myself for being obliged to take his observation in good part by reflecting that it would have applied much more thoroughly had his been the life in danger.

'I wish you had been a boy, Vera,' he remarked, 'and my son. I should have some satisfaction then. . . . Vera, I am thinking about making my will!'

I gave a start, genuine enough. I have not often been more amazed. Colonel L'Estrange had been wont hitherto to take but little notice of me. It was startling to be thus suddenly taken into confidence. Then it flashed upon me that I might turn the start to good account.

'Oh, Colonel L'Estrange,' I said, with becoming earnestness, 'don't say that.'

'Why not?' and his restless suspicious eyes were fastened upon me in a moment.

'Well, I hardly know why not. Only don't you feel as if there was something ominous about making a will.'

'Ominous,' he repeated, in an uneasy tone. 'What makes you think that?'

'Well, I mean, you know.' . . . 'Having at the moment but very vague ideas what I did mean, I found it necessary to

hesitate. 'I mean one hears of strange things happening, sometimes.'

'What have you heard?'

A school reminiscence had been slowly taking shape in my memory, and now its outlines were definite enough for practical use. 'I remember,' I said, 'a schoolfellow of mine telling me about an uncle, I think it was, of hers; quite a hale, strong man. A sort of sudden impulse took him to make his will. It was not convenient at the time, and he tried to shake off the feeling, but he found he could not rest satisfied, so he made it. He was dead within a month.'

'Ah, that is remarkable.' He was evidently interested.

'And then there is my mother's case.'

'Your mother? I never heard anything of that.'

'No, but Murray told me. Mamma had been speaking to her about making a will only the day before she died.'

I did not hold it necessary to go into particulars, to the effect that my mother, being empowered by her marriage settlement to dispose of certain property by will, if she had no family, had merely remarked to Murray it was fortunate she had a child, as it would have been such a trouble to her to have to make a will.

Colonel L'Estrange was evidently most desirably impressed. He was the most thorough egotist I ever came across. Had his mind been fifty times as capacious as it was, a mere fragment of space therein was all that could have been found for the universe after *I* had been accorded the necessary amount of room. I believe he thought these coincidences were especially ordered by providence for his guidance and warning.

'These things are remarkable, very remarkable,' he said. 'I confess I have a strong feeling on the subject myself. Do you know, Vera,' he went on, 'I was once told by a gipsy that if I ever made a will I should die afterward.'

I don't think I ever had such difficulty in preserving my gravity. The earnest solemnity with which the pompous old egotist announced this self-evident proposition as an ominous prophecy on his special account was almost too much for any-

one's self-command. But I struggled heroically with inward convulsions, and contrived to say with becoming seriousness—

'Well, why should you do it then? The prophecies of gipsies have sometimes been wonderfully verified, but apart from that, how likely such a one as that would be to work out its own,' fulfilment. Suppose, just after making your will, you found yourself in some unexpected danger, or seized by some attack of illness, how likely it would be that the nervous dread you could not avoid feeling would render the risk serious.'

'True, true. You take a most sensible view of the subject. I wish I could meet with the same intelligent sympathy in my own house.'

This was encouraging. Fate had most unexpectedly thrust me into a wholly unexpected position, and it really seemed as if, for once at least, she had contrived to avoid getting the square peg into the round hole.

'Why on earth should you worry yourself about the matter?' I went on. 'You are not engaged in any business, or addicted to any pursuits exposing you to sudden accidents, and you have not a large family to consider. The settlement of your property could surely be made in a very short time, if any need arose.'

'I am not sure about that.'

'Well, at any rate,' I said, gathering arguments as I went along, 'your making a will now would most likely only land you in needless trouble. You are not an old man, and save when you had bronchitis, you have never, in my memory, had a day's illness. What are the chances that you outlive both Aunt Marion and Conrad? Look at my father, still a strong, hale man, he was nearly five and twenty years older than mamma. If you made a will now, the chances are you would have all the worry for nothing, and have to make another.'

'There is something in that. Really Vera you are wonderfully shrewd for a girl of your age. But I must go in; it is getting near lunch time. Do not say anything to your aunt or Conrad about our conversation.'

'Certainly not,' I replied, 'I should not think of mentioning it to them.'

With that we parted. I had played the hypocrite that morning, with much success, on the spur of the moment. Was I justified in so doing? Let each one answer that question at the bar of his own conscience. Mine was not at all uneasy. I had transgressed no article of my moral code. I had used dissimulation as a weapon against the designs of a madman and a villain to inflict a cruel wrong on the innocent, but with no merely personal or selfish end in view. That just made all the difference in my view of the subject.

I had a long talk with my father after luncheon. He was a clear-sighted man, and grasped the position at once. I suspect there was a good deal of the natural cunning of selfishness about Marion, and that she had never so clearly shown her hand to my father as she had to me. She had not yet really learned to regard me as anything more than a half gipsy, with a great capacity for coming unharmed out of scrapes with horses.

'It is curious Colonel L'Estrange should take such a sudden fancy for you,' my father said, 'but it is fortunate. It may enable you to be of immense use, if you can keep in favour with him. Neither he nor Wilbraham are in the least likely to suppose that you have the faintest suspicion of what is afloat. If you can keep them under the misleading influence of that delusion you may probably learn a great deal that may be very useful. They will not be on their guard with you.'

'I don't exactly see how to play my part,' I said.

'So much the better. A carefully-arranged part is a fatal mistake when you do not know the action to which you will have to play. Watch what goes on, and trust to your wits. You had better tell Warren what you have told me. When do they lunch here?'

'On Thursday. But I cannot tell him when she is by.'

'No, true. You are going to drive her home though. Warren and I shall meet at four o'clock at the meeting of the almhouse

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trustees. It will last an hour and a half at least. You will be back by half-past five. I will send him back to see you.'

That luncheon on the following Thursday was pain and grief to me. Adrian Warren was so quiet, so unaffected, and free from all self-consciousness that he would have fitted easily and naturally into any position, from a palace to a hovel. But she—trim, neat, and self possessed—was always behaving properly. My father was a man of great taste, and the Deanery was beautifully fitted up in a style admirably in harmony with the old fashioned character of the house. That woman sitting in the Deanery drawingroom was like nothing on earth I can picture to myself save a figure cut out of a second-rate fashion book, and fitted into a picture of some fine old interior. Did Mr. Warren perceive it? What did he feel? I furtively watched him, but could find no answer to those questions. He was very quiet, but there was no flush or passing shade of any expression indicative of annoyance.

When, however, I had returned to the Deanery, after driving Mrs. Warren home, and observing with satisfaction that her presence in the Deanery carriage had been duly noted by sundry industrious collectors of scraps of miscellaneous information, and saw Mr. Warren again enter the room, I knew his wife was a thorn in his life. His manner was wholly altered; there was a careless ease about it which suited him so admirably that it was quite evident it was far more his natural manner than the serene calm which had marked his bearing in her presence.

He listened to my recital with keen attention. 'Yes,' he said, 'that is the undercurrent I had detected. But she was more cautious with me. It is unfortunate.'

'It is more than that, Mr. Warren,' I said, 'it is most dangerous. If Conrad's inheritance is to be saved for him, it is you and I who shall have to fight the battle not only against Colonel L'Estrange and Mr. Wilbraham, but against Aunt Marion. She will be always see-sawing about. When she gets frightened about Mr. Wilbraham she will go so far one way, and then she

will get frightened lest her own tactics should succeed, and hark back, and work off in the other direction.'

He looked at me with a curious expression for a moment.

'All the same,' he said, 'I am inclined to look at Mr. L'Estrange's chances from a more hopeful point of view now. Colonel L'Estrange's sudden fancy for you is a most valuable weight on our side. If you can only keep both him and Mr. Wilbraham wholly unsuspicuous that you know anything about the state of affairs you will be a most powerful ally. Somewhere at home I have seen lying about an old book, I forget its exact title, full of stories of remarkable fulfilments of prophecies. I will send for it. We must contrive to bring it, quite accidentally of course, under Colonel L'Estrange's notice. I believe that the more absurd such stories are, the more weight they have with a mind like his.'

'It is an anxious part I have to play,' I said. 'It is like walking among quicksands.'

'You must only bear in mind that the great point is to hinder Colonel L'Estrange from making a will without giving him the least idea that you have any motive in so doing.'

'But if Mr. Wilbraham is so desperate as you think, will he not forge one?'

'No, I think there is no danger of that. It is too risky, and he has the dread of Sir Brook upon him. Sir Brook is wholly unacquainted with the L'Estranges. There was a family quarrel over the marriage of his brother with Miss L'Estrange when Colonel L'Estrange was a child in petticoats. They have never held any communication. I have no doubt Mr. Wilbraham has made him believe his cousin is to some extent weak in the intellect. But he will have to be careful about any such risky transaction as forging a will. The merest hint of anything wrong might rouse Sir Brook into making dangerous inquiries. He has no love of his nephew. It is all this complication of dangers which forces Wilbraham to move so cautiously, and so far is a point in our favour.'

It was a strange drama this, into a leading part in which I

had been so suddenly thrust. A very questionable part, a certain class of moralists would say. A man may be justifiable in protecting himself from injury ; he can hardly be justified, without some such solid reason, in playing a double part. A very risky game, a man of the world would say. It is no concern of yours. Why mix yourself up in it ? You will only get into trouble. I cared not for any such morality or prudence. I held the moral justification of my position to be that I had no selfish interests at stake, and the worldly prudence that would have allowed me to look on in judicious neutrality while my cousin was robbed of his rights, without any effort to avert that catastrophe from him, would have seemed to me a very loathly sort of thing.

CHAPTER X.

MR. WILBRAHAM'S TACTICS.

I WAS just preparing to go to the Court next morning when Aunt Marion came fussing in. Gilbert Wilbraham was really coming. He was to arrive on the following Tuesday. She could not face him alone. I must come and help her.

'I have come to speak to your father about it,' she said. 'You have no idea what a difficult part I have to play when he is at the Court. Conrad is always so silent ; he hardly takes any notice of his cousin. It is most injudicious. It cannot be good policy to irritate him.'

'Papa is out,' I said, 'but you need not worry yourself. He will not object to my staying with you.'

'Well, be sure you come on Tuesday, in good time. And really, Vera, it is quite extraordinary. What did you say to your uncle when you met him the other day ?'

'I told him about the accident,' I discreetly replied.

'Well, it is most unaccountable. He seems to have taken a violent fancy for you all of a sudden. He has been saying ever since what a nice girl you have grown, and how wonderfully

sensible you are. Just a bit of his perversity. I am sure you did not show your good sense on that occasion ; getting run away with, and tearing off a horse's bridle.'

'Then it seems fortunate Colonel L'Estrange is perverse, seeing it has put him in good humour with me.'

'Don't answer in that flippant way, Vera. It is very bad taste. Yes, I admit, so far it is fortunate. Only I cannot bear that you should be encouraged in such hoydenish ways.'

'They did you good service long ago, Aunt Marion, and if they keep Colonel L'Estrange in good humour now, you will have no cause to complain. And I will be sure and be at the Court in good time on Tuesday, so you need not be uneasy.'

None the less, I received two reminders before I duly presented myself on Tuesday at the Court, just in time to dress for dinner. In the drawingroom Gilbert Wilbraham and I met, virtually for the first time, for though I suppose I must have seen him as a child, I had no more recollection of him than he probably had of me. I mentally pronounced him odious, and persuaded myself that crafty wiliness was stamped upon his whole appearance and demeanour, accurately detecting the characteristics I knew he possessed. In truth, I believe he was a very ordinary looking man, of polished manner, and considerable conversational powers. His reception of me was highly satisfactory. He seemed to accept me as quite a matter of course, and took very little notice of me.

I heard Aunt Marion enlightening him regarding me in the drawingroom after dinner, in a fashion so perfectly in accordance with our purposes that nothing but her absolute ignorance of them could have enabled her to make such a happy hit. When Aunt Marion tried to aid a cause—as Gilbert Wilbraham was soon to find—disaster rained upon it like hail stones. She was explaining to him that I was really a very nice girl, a charming disposition, terribly spoilt by a bad bringing up, a regular gipsy. But Colonel L'Estrange liked to have me about the house. I was lively and full of fun. I amused him very much.

Almost every hour as it passed caused my indignation against

Gilbert Wilbraham to wax hotter and hotter, until it was with the utmost difficulty I could keep up even a semblance of cordiality towards him. Whether he was directly practising on Colonel L'Estrange I could not quite make up my mind. I was inclined to think not, but indirectly he was playing his game with a skill which fully justified Mr. Warren's estimate of him as a dangerous antagonist. His manner to Conrad was a masterpiece, from his point of view. He was almost markedly attentive to him, often specially addressing him, and showing particular interest in anything he said, in outward semblance appearing to treat any opinion Conrad expressed as if the fact that he held it entitled it to deferential consideration. Yet into it all he contrived to infuse a tinge of half-contemptuous pity, as though his conduct to his cousin was the result of kindly consideration for some poor weak creature who must be borne with, and gently humoured. It was more craftily done than I could have conceived possible, and as I watched the effect his tactics had upon Colonel L'Estrange, and the often irritable impatience of his manner to his son, my wrath burned fiercer and more fiercely.

But vengeance came ere Gilbert Wilbraham had been a week at the Court, swift and sure, taking off most effectively the sharp edges of his supercilious condescension towards Conrad; and, crowning stroke of good luck, I was the fortunate instrument of the same. One evening at dinner Aunt Marion suddenly said :

'Oh, by the bye, Vera, I met Lord Wichborough. He asked me to tell you he should expect to see you to-morrow. They think they will have a good run.'

'We generally do when the meet is at Thornley,' I said.

'Ah, you are a great hunter, I hear, Miss Dormer,' put in Mr. Wilbraham. 'I am told it is quite a sight to see you in the field.'

I smiled upon him as I had not been able to do for long. A great blaze of hope had flamed up within me. 'You had better come out then to-morrow and judge,' I said.

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'Well, I don't know, I have not done much hunting this season. I might get a spill.'

'I am sure you would not. There is Fury; he is a capital fencer. He would carry you well.'

I caught a glance from Conrad, and was forced to find something wrong with a bracelet clasp, to hide a smile I could not repress.

'Does his name denote his nature?' asked Mr. Wilbraham.

'Oh, dear, no.' Then I turned to Colonel L'Estrange.

'Wouldn't Fury carry Mr. Wilbraham well? He carries Conrad admirably, when he rides him.'

'Oh, then, I think I may venture,' Mr. Wilbraham said, with even more than his usual intonation of contempt, and the cup of my rejoicing overflowed. Fury was a capital fencer; there was no doubt about that point, if you were not deceived by his guileful assumption of perfect willingness, but always treated him as a horse that needed urging. If you allowed yourself to be taken in, your fate was sealed. Altogether, he was a pernicious brute, and very few people, save Conrad, could do much with him.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Colonel L'Estrange sarcastically. 'I think you may feel assured on that point.' And again Conrad and I exchanged covert glances.

I went off to the Deanery in the morning to mount, and thus avoided riding with Mr. Wilbraham to the meet. When he came on to the ground I could see he had not had a pleasant ride.

'This is a queer sort of horse,' he said to me.

'Is he?' I innocently replied. 'I think Conrad rather likes him. He has often hunted him.'

Gilbert Wilbraham was not fated to hunt him once. That which I knew would happen at the first stiff jump, happened at the very outset. The fox broke cover in a specially awkward direction for the field. There was a thick tangled ragged hedge to get past, according as you chose, or could. Fury went at it with ears pricked, and an air of resolute determination, as

though not to be daunted by a ten feet wall. Gilbert Wilbraham fell into the trap. Just as he should have risen to the jump, Fury stopped dead, wrenched down his head, and gave a tremendous kick. Gilbert Wilbraham shot head first into the hedge with exquisite directness and force, and the sight of his top boots, gyrating wildly in the air, gladdened my eyes as Swallow made for a gap which we both knew. Fury set off for his stable with a speed which did away with all hope of catching him.

Mr. Wilbraham was in the drawingroom when I entered it before dinner, looking rather surly, and a good deal scratched about the face. 'Well, Miss Dormer,' he said, 'I shall not ask your opinion about a horse again.'

'Well, but really,' I replied with a most innocent air, 'it was most extraordinary. Conrad used to hunt him often, and was almost sure to be in at the death. He never served you that way, Conrad, did he?'

'Never,' replied my cousin calmly.

'You should not have allowed your cousin to ride him, Conrad,' put in Aunt Marion, who happened to have on a fit of thinking it unsafe to irritate her nephew.

'I was not going to tell an old hunter like Gilbert he had better not ride a horse a poor invalid like myself has been used to ride.'

Even Colonel L'Estrange smiled a sort of saturnine smile, I believe he enjoyed his nephew's discomfiture. His growing uneasiness about his will made Mr. Wilbraham rather troublesome to him notwithstanding his partiality for him. More than once during dinner he returned to the subject with a sort of ill-natured relish, under which the sufferer fumed visibly. Aunt Marion, after some futile signalling across the table, advised herself to make a diversion. She fell suddenly upon a young and inexperienced footman who brought her a note.

'From Mrs. Mortimer, ma'am,' he said.

'How is it that I did not have it sooner?

'Martin has only just returned. Mrs. Mortimer was out when he arrived. He had to wait for her return.'

'Out,' said Aunt Marion. 'Why, I gave you the note at eleven o'clock this morning.'

The lad hesitated, but the butler was out of the room at the moment, so he found no succour.

'Martin did not get away till after dinner, ma'am.'

'Not till after dinner!' repeated Aunt Marion, in much wrath.

'No, ma'am. Peters was gone out, and he had told Martin on no account to leave the stables for a moment till he returned, for he was sure Fury would soon be home.'

In the midst of an awful silence I remarked with an air of innocent candour:

'Dear me, Aunt Marion, wasn't it lucky Fury made off straight for home? If anyone had caught him your note would never have reached Mrs. Mortimer at all.'

Aunt Marion darted an annihilating glance at me, and as soon as we were in the drawingroom opened a terrific fire upon me. Every possible disaster that could befall the house of L'Estrange in future would result entirely from my mischievous folly in thus irritating Mr. Wilbraham.

If he was irritated with me he concealed it most skilfully. There was no change in his manner to me, but there was a decided change in his manner to Conrad. A man can hardly treat another as a poor sort of creature when that other has ridden with ease and safety a horse which has planted him head foremost in a hedge before he had succeeded in taking it over a single fence. I really believe the incident shortened his visit, for Colonel L'Estrange gratified his naturally spiteful disposition by making most irritating covert allusions to the accident.

I was sitting alone in the drawing-room the morning before the day fixed for Mr. Wilbraham's departure, when he came into the room, and glancing round, said :

'I see Aunt Marion is not here. Do you know where she is, Miss Dormer?'

'She is gone out,' I answered, rapidly wheeling my heavy guns into position. Gilbert Wilbraham was crafty and cautious, but he trod in the wrong place sometimes. On this occasion he forgot that because you find a person quietly reading by a window looking towards one point of the compass, it by no means follows that person might not have been five minutes before in full view of a window looking towards another point. I had just seen him meet and speak to Aunt Marion outside the house as she drove away.

He sauntered leisurely to the table, and took up a paper for a moment. Then he came and sat carelessly down on the arm of a chair close to where I was seated.

'I am quite sorry to think I have to leave to-morrow,' he said, 'I enjoy being here so much.'

'Aunt Marion will be very glad to hear you say so,' I answered. 'She always thinks the Court must be so dull for visitors.'

'For young ones perhaps. Middle-aged men like me don't find a quiet place dull for a change. But I do not quite like Aunt Marion's looks,' he added. 'It is the first time I have seen her since her return from abroad. She strikes me as looking a little worn and anxious.'

Whither does this tend? I said to myself. His carelessness of manner was a little overdone, betraying that there was a definite purpose underneath ready to crop up through the superficial covering if not judiciously guarded. I felt I was walking among pitfalls.

'She is so nervous and fussy,' I replied. 'She wears herself out worrying over trifles.'

'Do you think they are only trifles, Miss Dormer?'

I looked at him with eyes wide open. 'Why, what else but trifles can she have to worry herself about?' I asked. 'I am sure she has everything a woman can wish for. Of course Conrad's frail health has been rather a disappointment to her, and she must have been very anxious when Colonel L'Estrange

had bronchitis so badly. But he is quite well now. I am sure I think she has very little she need worry about.'

'I am not quite sure you are altogether in the right there. I do not quite like my uncle's condition. By-the-by, how do you like Mr. Warren?'

'He seems very nice. But I have seen very little of him.'

'Does he not come here often then?'

'I suppose he comes as often as is necessary. But I do not think he often sees anyone save Colonel L'Estrange.'

'Do my aunt and cousin not like him then, do you think?'

'Oh, I think they like him very much. He gets on very well with Colonel L'Estrange. That is the important point for them, I suppose.'

'I am glad to hear that, for, as perhaps you know, I recommended Mr. Warren for the post; and I was a little anxious, for I had almost fancied he had been keeping out of my way while I was here.'

'I think not,' I said. 'I know this is rather a busy time with him.' What in the world was the man driving at?

'It is, as you say, very important he should get on well with Colonel L'Estrange. Do you know, it strikes me my uncle's irritability increases.'

'Do you think so?' I said.

'Yes, I do. I have not seen him for a considerable time, and it certainly strikes me he is more irritable than he used to be. It makes me rather anxious.'

We are coming to it I thought. 'Why, Mr. Wilbraham,' I said laughing, 'you are taking a leaf out of Aunt Marion's book. Why should that make you anxious? An irritable person seems to be more a cause for exasperation than for anxiety.'

'Not when the irritable person has a great deal in his power. My uncle seems wonderfully taken with you, Miss Dormer. He was saying to me yesterday you were like a sunbeam about the house. I fancy his irritability springs a good deal from depression, and that he does not find either Aunt Marion or poor

Conrad very enlivening companions. Has my uncle ever said anything to you about his will ?'

My heart gave a great thump. I am sure he might have heard it. 'About his will ?' I repeated slowly, as if a little puzzled. 'How ? I don't fancy he has made one.'

'I know he has not. But has he never said anything to you about a superstitious feeling he has ?'

'Oh, yes, I replied with alacrity. 'I know he has a sort of superstitious dread of it. I think a gipsy told him something.'

'Yes. That is most unfortunate, for he ought to make a will.'

'Why should he ?' I asked with a look of innocent wonder.

'Well, to use a paradox, he ought to be got to make a will in order to prevent him making one. I think you do not understand the danger. Having known my uncle almost from boyhood I understand his disposition well. I do not think his condition satisfactory, and I am certain there is great danger of his acting on sudden and unaccountable impulses. Now beyond the comparatively small amount provided for in my aunt's marriage settlement, nearly the whole of his property is absolutely at his own control. The sort of will he makes is therefore a matter of no small importance to both Aunt Marion and Conrad, towards both of whom I have been much grieved to see him of late show signs occasionally of bitterness and angry feeling. It would be most disastrous for them if, in a fit of irritability some day, he made a will that would be prejudicial to their interests.'

'Surely he would never do such a thing as that ?'

'Not deliberately, perhaps. But with this tendency to violent fits of irritation, which I fear as he grows older are likely to increase in violence, one cannot feel safe. The thought of Aunt Marion and Conrad keeps me very anxious. Now if he could once be induced to make a will, we should be very safe. His superstitious dread on the subject would almost certainly prevent his ever cancelling it by a second. Of course it would never do for Aunt Marion to say anything to him, so I really feel as if I was to some extent the guardian of her interests, as well as my cousin's.'

'You mean that you are thinking of speaking to Colonel L'Estrange about it?' I asked, by a desperate effort preserving an air of merely moderate interest in the discussion.

'Well, that I fear would hardly do either. He might suspect I was acting under Aunt Marion's instigation. Neither dare I say anything to her. She is not a very judicious person in her methods. I have been thinking most anxiously over the matter while I have been staying here, and it has occurred to me that if anyone could be of use in the matter, it would be yourself.'

This was coming to business with a vengeance. I felt my colour had risen, so assuming a sudden air of intense interest, I said :

'I, Mr. Wilbraham? What an extraordinary notion! I should be only too glad to be of use if I could. But I know nothing of business; and it strikes me if I begin worrying Colonel L'Estrange to make a will, his partiality for me will soon vanish.'

'You will have to play your part with care. But if you could gradually and cautiously combat his superstitious fears, I think you might, to a great extent, conquer them. Then, you might suggest to him to let me have a memorandum of his wishes, and leave the whole thing in my hands. I could arrange it all for him, and he would have nothing further to do than just to sign the will. It would not even be necessary for him to read it over, unless he liked.'

I could not answer for a moment. I dared not trust my voice. Fortunately I was sitting on a low chair, and by resting my elbow on my knee, and leaning my head upon my hand, while I gazed out of the window, as if in deep thought, I partially hid my face from him. The course I had better follow had flashed upon me in a moment. But the brief space I spent in a desperate battle for self-mastery seemed quite a suitable pause for consideration of an unexpected suggestion.

'I might be able to do it,' I said at last, 'but it would have to be very cautiously done. And I do not think it would be desirable to make any such attempt at the present moment, Mr. Wilbraham.'

'No. Why not?'

'Why, because Colonel L'Estrange knows that my mother was speaking about making a will only the very day before she died so suddenly.'

'Indeed, was it so? How very unfortunate that Colonel L'Estrange should ever have heard it.'

'Of course,' I said, 'it made an impression upon him. He was speaking to me only a few days before you came, about it, so it is still in his mind. It seems to me, under these circumstances, it would be very injudicious to say anything to him just now.'

'Well, yes. I fear you are right,' he said, and furtively glancing at him, I saw a dark scowl for a moment pass over his face, which made me feel very certain the check was a serious one to him.

'You see,' I said, 'if I was to broach the subject at all at present, the result would probably be to arouse in his mind an irritation against me which might seriously stand in the way of my future usefulness.'

'Yes, I believe you are right. It will be best to pause for a little. But I may trust you for future help in this matter, Miss Dormer?'

'You may trust to my always being ready to do the utmost I can for both Aunt Marion and Conrad, Mr. Wilbraham,' I said earnestly. 'Both have been very kind to me. I should be very ungrateful did I not strive to serve them in every way I can. I am very glad you have spoken so frankly to me on this subject. I think a knowledge of your views will greatly aid my chances of being of use, and I certainly will do all I can to keep myself in favour with Colonel L'Estrange. I think, however, it will be best, will it not, that neither Aunt Marion nor Conrad should know anything of what has passed between us.'

He positively beamed upon me. I believe at the moment he felt himself the possessor of Wichenborough Court and all the property attached to it. 'Certainly,' he said, 'it is most important they should know nothing. My hopes of bringing the mat-

ter to a successful issue are immensely increased by our conversation. And as I am a good deal more than old enough to be your father, Miss Dormer, I may, perhaps, venture to say, that conversation quite enables me to endorse my uncle's opinion, that you have a most remarkable amount of shrewdness and good sense for a girl of your age. I may further trust to you, may I not, to keep me informed of anything you think it desirable I should know? I shall probably be abroad for the best part of the winter, but I could come here at any moment, if you thought it desirable.'

'Certainly, if anything should happen which I think it advisable for you to know, I will not fail to communicate with you instantly.'

A charmingly safe promise, and he looked so radiantly hopeful I felt nearly as well pleased as when I saw his top boots sticking out of the hedge. With a faithful promise from him that he would come early in the spring, and see how things were getting on, we parted the next morning, almost affectionately.

Of course I faithfully reported the satisfactory results of my visit to the Court to Mr. Warren, and sometimes, when we were discussing the business, I caught his glance fixed upon me with a half anxious troubled expression which I did not understand; but he never made the slightest comment on my personal action in the matter. It did not occur to me to speculate whether he had any opinions at all on the subject. Conrad and his interests absorbed all my thoughts. But looking back now, over all the transactions of tha' time, I cannot remember one single word or action on Adrian Warren's part which gave the least indication of any individual sentiments of his regarding my share in the strange drama in which we had become so curiously associated.

One fact concerning him became speedily very clear to me. His devotion to Conrad, though naturally somewhat different in kind, was in degree fully equal to mine. But it was no merely romantic sentiment. It had some tangible starting point in the region of fact. Whatever service Conrad had done him was either very great, or he had deemed it so. Either hypothesis

would account for the fact, for his was one of those noble natures which estimate obligations rather by their own capacity for response, than by the actual amount of service done. The oftener I saw him the more fully I recognised in him a type of character new and attractive to me. Bold, manly, fearless, as intolerant of mere shams and conventionalities as I was myself, but full of gentle, kindly consideration for others. A man in whom the fullest exercise of liberty to shape his own life as he pleased would never degenerate into license to override the interests or feelings of other people.

After thus safely shooting the small rapid of Gilbert Wilbraham's visit, I found myself floating peacefully on one of the calm level stretches of the river of life, with nothing very particular to occupy me, beyond keenly augmented interest in the state of affairs at Wichborough Court. And thus the last tranquil, unclouded summer and autumn of my life glided smoothly away.

CHAPTER XI.

A MUTUAL REVELATION.

THROUGHOUT all that autumn, and the ensuing winter, old Simon had been steadily failing, so that it did not seem as if the evil proclivities of his son-in-law were destined for long to cause any annoyance to Mr. Warren. I had visited the old man often, and more than once, when we chanced to be alone, he had very earnestly impressed upon me to be sure and remember my promise, that Sally should have her money without her husband getting any hint of the transaction. When, therefore, early in February, the old man died, I was somewhat anxious about the execution of my commission, dreading to arouse the worthy Mr. Collier's suspicions, either by going to the cottage, or sending for Mrs. Collier to come and see me.

I was still in a state of some uncertainty on the subject when, one morning, Mr. Warren came unannounced into the drawing-room, before luncheon,

'I have been visiting the Dean,' he said, 'to ask a favour, and as he says he will not be at home this evening, he has sent me to explain the matter to you.'

'He is going to dine and sleep at the Palace,' I replied. 'What can I do for you?'

'Well, the case is this. Lord Wichborough and Colonel L'Estrange are both selling some house property in Buckton, so I am acting for both. The purchase money, a considerable sum, is to be paid over to me this afternoon. I do not care to keep so large a sum at such a lonely place as the Manor all night, but I am sure I cannot reach Wichborough in time to lodge it in the bank. The Dean kindly undertakes to let it be placed in his strong box for the night, and to-morrow I can pay it into the bank. He says he will leave the keys with you, and sent me to settle with you about the time I should be here.'

'I will arrange to be at home at any time that suits you,' I said.

He thought for a moment, and then said, 'I think I can be here by six o'clock, if that will suit you?'

'Perfectly well. I shall be sure to be in by that time. Are you really going to venture to ride through the Haunted Copse at dusk, with a large sum of money in your possession?' I added, laughing.

'Oh yes! The Haunted Copse has become a very tame orderly place. Besides, as no one knows my intentions, I should not be looked for so very wide of the direct route from Buckton to the Manor.'

Then I bethought me of asking him about the Colliers and for how long he intended to let them remain at the cottage?

'Not an hour longer than this day week,' he said. 'I saw Mrs. Collier yesterday, and told her so. I think, Miss Dormer, if I may venture to suggest, it will be as well if you do not go there now.'

I told him of my object in going, and of my special desire to avoid Collier.

'Well,' he said, 'if you can go this afternoon, I think you will find her alone. She told me, yesterday, her husband was

away at Ratchford looking about some place he thought he could get, and that he would not be home until late this evening.'

This was an excellent opportunity. I could ride over on Flash in the afternoon, and get the business settled. I did not intend to take the money with me, only to ask Mrs. Collier to come to the Deanery and open the packet, purposing then to offer her, if she liked to leave it with me, to give her some interest upon the sum.

As soon as my father was gone I went up to the stables to tell Jackson of my intentions. He at once suggested a change of programme.

'If you are only going into the Chase, Miss Vera,' he said, 'couldn't you take Swallow and give her a canter? She's so fresh I was really afraid to let Holt take her out this morning, he's a little bit rash. I meant to give her a canter after the Dean was gone, but I don't think I'll have time, Holt being away with him.'

Nothing loth, I agreed to Jackson's proposal. One of Swallow's exceptional merits was that, save when she was in an exceedingly exultant mood, she would wait quietly, tied to a gate, for a reasonable time. If I gave her a little exercise before I paid my visit, she would stand quite well for a short time, and would be a good excuse for making it as brief as possible. I knew of a huge blown down tree, close to the cottage, just out of sight, to which I could fasten her, the trunk of which would make an excellent mounting block. Thence I could creep cautiously up under the garden hedge, and by a little judicious reconnoitring make out, before presenting myself at the cottage, whether Mrs Collier was alone. Even if her husband was safely afar, some of his disreputable acquaintance might still be about.

The day was a charming one for a ride, soft and fresh, with a clear, gray sky overhead. Swallow was very lively, and in splendid condition. I had to give her more than one good canter before I judged her to be sufficiently sobered down to render it safe to leave her to her own devices for a few minutes.

These preliminary canters, with a little quiet riding to let her cool, took up a good deal of time, so that it was later than I had intended when I reached the fallen tree where she was to wait for me. Her demeanour was by that time quite satisfactory, and I left her without the least fear that she would fail to stand quietly enough for the short time of my absence.

I cautiously approached the cottage, and was close under the garden hedge, when I came to an abrupt halt. A strong odour of tobacco smoke became perceptible. Mrs Collier was not addicted to smoking, as far as I knew. Almost immediately I heard a voice speaking, and it was a man's voice. He was evidently sitting on a rough bench there was in the garden, very close to where I was standing. Then another man answered, and I felt certain the last speaker was Collier.

A sudden feeling of dread came over me, for I was certain I caught Mr. Warren's name. I listened, and the vague dread changed into sickening terror. Exactly what passed I have never been able to recall, the dread horror of their meaning has always seemed to me to prevent my remembering the words that were used. Besides it was only by degrees that the horrible truth became clear to me. The two men were disputing about the fitness of some arrangements to secure their desired end. That end being none other than the murder of Adrian Warren. Of course the sale of the property in Buckton had been known, and Collier's pretended visit to Ratchford had really been one to Buckton, to find out all he could about the matter. He had ascertained that the money was to be paid over that afternoon, and then he knew that Mr. Warren must either take it back to the Manor, or into Wichborough, to the bank. Which course he intended to follow had been ascertained with tolerable certainty by the simple device of sending a spy to lurk unseen close to the turnpike on the road from the Manor to Buckton, and see whether he took a ticket on paying. The messenger had reported that he had passed, and refused a ticket, saying he did not need it. Then he was certainly going round by Wichborough. Men, well-armed—how many I knew not—

were already gone to await him in the Haunted Copse, expecting him to be in time for the bank, but intending to wait at least until six o'clock on the chance of his coming. Before another hour had passed a new murder would be added to the long list of crimes associated with that hateful spot.

For a moment my heart beat wildly, a choking sensation arose in my throat, and my sight seemed to be failing me. Then the tumult passed away to be succeeded by intense keenness of mental perception, coupled with utter unconsciousness of any feeling. I softly withdrew to a safe distance, paused, looked at my watch, made a rapid mental calculation, and hurried to the spot where I had left Swallow. To make the better speed I unfastened her with the utmost deliberation. Every instant was precious. If by any manifestation of nervous haste I excited her I might have some little difficulty in mounting. In a few moments I was firmly seated in the saddle, and had taken up my reins, and I felt that the subtle electric current of keen sympathy had passed from rider to horse. Swallow knew there was urgent work on hand. Every muscle in her body seemed to be quivering under me with intense excitement, and it was, in truth, no slight demand I was going to make on her keen intelligence and exceptional muscular strength.

I had calculated that if, within a given time, I could reach the turnpike on the London road, near to the cross roads, I should be almost certain to intercept Adrian Warren, and so warn him of his danger. But the time in which I must do the distance was very short, and between me and the turnpike flowed the Wich. There was but one chance, and I headed at once for the river, in a slanting direction towards Wichborough, so as to reach a spot where the banks were low.

Could I do it? Would my theoretical knowledge carry me safely through an attempt to swim Swallow across the Wich? If I failed—I set my teeth hard. I do not think it ever crossed my thoughts that failure meant for me death by drowning. I only remembered that it meant death by violence for Adrian Warren. Nor was crossing the river the only difficulty and

danger to be faced. The ride from the river bank to the turnpike road was not one to be faced lightly in broad day light, and the evening was rapidly drawing in. There was still light enough for ordinary purposes, but it was not the sort of light in which to demand exceptional work from even a trained hunter. But Swallow was in the mood for anything. She was going then more like a deer than a horse over the rough ground we were crossing at headlong speed.

We came at last to the river's brink, and I held her straight at it, urging her on with voice and hand. She hesitated for a moment, as if she could not credit I really demanded such a feat from her. But when she found I held her firmly to it, I felt her gather herself together, and in another moment we had plunged into the clear, cold current of the swift flowing river. Giving her her head freely, I clung tightly to the saddle, and sat firm and still. I have no very clear remembrance of what I felt, only a vague recollection of the strange sensation of feeling myself almost forcibly lifted out of the saddle, and of the strong, steady pressure of the current. My absolute absorption in one over-mastering thought seemed to leave me but a hazy perception of my own identity. I distinctly remember the thrill of satisfaction with which I felt Swallow's feet touch the bottom, and knew that the first great risk was safely surmounted.

With only a momentary pause for a hurried shake on gaining the bank, I turned westward. Away on my left hand was the Haunted Copse. How dense already would be the gloom in that horrible hollow ! Between me and the turnpike lay fully a mile of most desperate riding—tangled hedges, ragged ditches, some of them fenced with awkward railings, ugly gates, and the light seeming to wane with almost every moment. Every feature of the scene came back to me as if it was but a week ago I had speculated on the possibility of riding over it, as I walked down to the bridge. It was dangerous work, there was no question about that ; but right well did Swallow bear out the character Lord Wichborough had given her. The excitement she had caught from sympathy with her rider seemed only to

intensify her physical powers. Clear-headed and sagacious as ever, she never made a single mistake, but went safely and unflinchingly through what, I am certain, was the severest piece of work ever demanded of her.

At last, with a rush, she cleared the ditch, and burst on to the high road, through the well-remembered gap, now much grown over. I glanced at my watch as I galloped towards the turnpike. I was well within the time. Surely all was safe. The turnpike-keeper, a stupid old man, was standing at his door. He knew me well enough, but I do not think he noticed my strange plight.

'Has Mr Warren passed through on the way to Wichborough?' I asked.

'Yes, miss. I'd have thought you'd have met him. He hasn't been gone through but a few minutes. I should think he'd be near about the hollow now. He were riding slowly.'

I hardly stayed to hear him out. 'Riding slowly,' rather earlier on the road than he had anticipated. Thus I had missed him, and his leisurely pace would render his fate, if possible, more certain. I tore along the road at utmost speed, reached the cross roads, and turned towards Wichborough, but no one was visible. Was I too late? A heavy sob broke from me in spite of myself. I reached the brow of the descent, and then, through the gloom, deepening to almost total darkness in the bottom of the hollow, I saw him riding leisurely down into the very jaws of death. Down the slope I went at break-neck speed, and I saw him start, and half turn in his saddle, as the rapid beat of Swallow's hoofs caught his ear. A few strides brought me on a line with him. 'Ride, ride for your life,' was all I could gasp; and as I saw him settle in the saddle I gave his horse a sharp cut with my whip. He sprang forward, and in another moment we were tearing through the hollow at our horses' utmost speed.

I was sure I caught a glimpse of moving figures among the trees. But the pace alone would have been enough to frustrate their murderous purpose, without the startling incident of the rapid approach of an unexpected rider. We dashed unmolested

through the hollow, and up the opposite slope, and in a few minutes were out on the open road, with pasture fields, bounded by light hedges, on each side of us.

I had saved Adrian Warren's life! Nerved to do what could only have been done on an exceptional horse by—alas—I knew only too well what motive power. The danger was past; the fearful tension of the terrible uncertainty relaxed; the excitement died down, and I turned giddy and faint, shaking as if I was in an ague fit. I pulled up, and Swallow, in good need of a breathing space, was ready enough to stand perfectly still. Mr. Warren pressed his horse close against mine. I think he saw I was swaying in the saddle, and if, as is probable, I was very white, I suppose there was light enough for him to see it.

'Miss Dormer,' he said, in a low anxious tone, 'What does it mean? What has happened?'

With a desperate effort, and one or two deeply-drawn breaths, I managed to steady myself enough to answer, in rather spasmodic sentences.

'They were waiting to murder you in the hollow. Collier was not at Ratchford. He was in Buckton, finding out. They sent some one to watch the turnpike as you went, and when you didn't take a ticket they made sure you were coming round this way with the money. I heard Collier talking behind the hedge. I thought I should catch you at the turnpike.'

His previous knowledge of my intended visit in the afternoon of course enabled him to understand this rather disconnected account.

'At the turnpike!' he repeated.

I knew what was passing in his mind, and I knew the whole truth must come out. How had I reached the turnpike? How, starting from the cottage, contrived to overtake him? It was impossible in the time that I could have ridden round by the bridge at Buckton. Had I ridden through Wichenborough? I must have met him. I tried to stave off the question.

'Yes,' I said, 'the turnpike on the London road. I made sure I should be in time to stop you there. It was horrible when I

found you had passed. I thought I was too late. It made me feel quite faint,' I added, catching, in my new-born sense of dread and dismay, at a paltry subterfuge.

'But how did you reach the turnpike?'

'By riding hard.'

'But you were on the other side of the river.'

'Yes. Now I am this side.'

'He bent a little forward, and I knew he was looking closely at me, but I would not raise my eyes.

'How did you cross it?'

I knew by the tone what suspicion was dawning upon him. In a low voice, almost a whisper, I answered :

'I swam it.'

There was a dead silence ; only a few moments' silence by the beat of a pendulum, but the silence of an age, measured by sensations. I seemed to divine intuitively the thoughts that were passing in his mind. How he was mentally going over the ground I had traversed, estimating what I had done by the light of his own skilled horsemanship, and how the full truth was breaking upon him. I sat motionless and silent. At last a single word fell upon my ear :

'Vera!'

I can hear it now, echoing across the long long years that stretch between me and that momentous day, in all its low, deep, passionate tremulousness. It would fill pages to tell all it meant : but its most pregnant meaning was that ignorance, unconsciousness, whatever it might be, was gone for ever. We both understood ourselves, and each other. I neither moved nor spoke. Then I felt his arm passed round me, and a passionate kiss pressed upon my cheek. He gave a sudden start.

'Good heavens!' he exclaimed, 'and you are drenched, of course. Miss Dormer, you must try and ride on at once, or you will get thoroughly chilled.'

Without replying I touched Swallow, and we trotted on in a silence which I only broke to say, as we entered the town—

'Keep to the back streets.'

Thus, by a little winding about, we reached the Deanery gates almost unobserved. There Mr. Warren paused.

'I will not come in. You will take the money, will you not? I must see you to-morrow. May I call about eleven?'

'I shall be at home,' I replied. He handed me a sealed packet, raised his hat, and rode away without another word. I only saw that he was very pale.

I meant to ride straight to the stables, and not give Cumming or the footman a chance of inspecting my strange condition. But Jackson himself was standing on the gravel near the door.

'You are very late, Miss Vera,' he said. 'I was beginning to get uneasy.' It was too dark for him to perceive the state of things.

'I have been in difficulties, Jackson,' I said.

'What's wrong, miss?'

'I made a foolish attempt to cross the river, and Swallow had to swim for it.'

'Miss Vera!' he gasped. It was all he could say.

'I shall not try it again,' I said. 'You need not say anything about it. I am going now to change my wet things.'

I slipped into the house before he had time to recover from his stupefaction, and thus avoided any further questions. I hastily locked up the packet in my father's strong box, and then went up to my room. To Waters I was less explicit, I only told her I had tried to cross the river, and had found the water deeper than I expected, so had got very wet.

'And you've got a chill, Miss Vera, I know you have. You are quite white, and look very ill.'

Ill enough I felt, but not chilled, rather stunned, bruised, bewildered. How thankful I felt that my father was not expected home until the following afternoon!

'I think the best thing I can do,' I said, 'will be to go to bed at once. Then you can bring me some tea. It will be the best way to get rid of any chill.'

To this proposition Waters readily assented, and thus I secured the thing of which I stood most sorely in need—not

warmth, restoratives, precautions against physical chill, my hardy frame could well have dispensed with them, but silence, solitude, stillness, to calm my over strung nerves, and soothe my bruised and shaken spirit.

What was this that I had done? or rather that had been done in me, without the faintest suspicion on my part of what was coming to pass? Deep passionate love for the husband of another woman had grown up within me without the possibility of such a contingency ever crossing my thoughts. Search as I might among the records of the past I could find no trace of any sensation or perception which now condemned me in my own eyes, because I had failed to give heed to that which might have warned me in time. Had I been older, more experienced, it might have been different. I might, perhaps, have caught indications of danger which, as it was, just because I had failed to understand their significance, had left no print on my memory. I knew that I had a sincere regard and great admiration for Mr. Warren, and never ceased to marvel at the strange infatuation which had induced him to tie himself for life to such a woman as his wife, but not the faintest forewarning glimmer had prepared me for the sudden flood of light which burst upon me when that conversation in the cottage garden brought to me the certainty that Adrian Warren's life hung upon my nerve and skill. And the light that had broken upon me had broken upon him also. But that consciousness brought to men no sense of shame and humiliation. The revelation had been, thus far, mutual. The moment which had betrayed me to him, had betrayed him to me. Whether it had betrayed him to himself, of course, I could not tell.

Was I to blame? Was there culpability in the bare fact of such a feeling having grown up within me without my detecting it? Unhesitatingly I exonerated myself. I had meant and thought no wrong, I would accept no sense of guilt. I was pained and shocked beyond expression when I thought of Mrs. Warren, all the more because I could not but be conscious of my own advantages over her. But it was the sort of pain I

should have felt had some accident to me involved serious injury to her ; pain and bitter regret, but untinged by any colouring of remorse. I had done and thought no wrong in the past, I would do and think no wrong in the future. What my exact line of action in future must be was yet to be decided. Adrian Warren himself must guide me on that point. My confidence in him was unshakable. Not a doubt crossed my mind that he would guide us both in the path of honour and safety ; that selfish passions would have no power to make him swerve a single hair'sbreadth in his course. I could seek guidance from no other. He was nearly fifteen years my senior. The righteous counsels of his riper experience must guide my steadfast determination to do right at all costs.

CHAPTER XII.

HONOUR VERSUS INCLINATION.

IT was long before I slept. But at last, worn out by actual physical exertion, as well as by intense nervous strain, I fell into a heavy slumber ; and when I awoke, with a start, the direction from which the sun's rays fell across my window, warned me it was later than usual. I jumped out of bed, and—rare action for me—made straight for the looking glass. The results of the inspection were not unsatisfactory. I felt shaken and weak, but I did not look very bad ; not worse than a chill might easily account for. Waters came in at the moment.

'Oh, Miss Vera, you are never going to get up ? I was just thinking of sending for Dr. Brydges.'

'Dr. Brydges ! nonsense. What do I want with a doctor ? I daresay I have caught a little cold, but that is nothing. Get me some breakfast, and I will eat it while I dress. Mr. Warren is coming at eleven, to arrange some business which papa left for him to settle with me.'

By the time I was ready to go down stairs I was still better

satisfied with my appearance. My bath and breakfast had done a great deal for me. There was nothing about me calculated to attract any special notice. I went down to the drawingroom to await Mr. Warren with a degree of composure, which is, even now, somewhat a mystery to me. Anxious, distressed, perplexed, I was, but I had no feeling of embarrassment of meeting him. I suppose my moral sense was as unconventional as everything else about me. It seems to me that I simply regarded both him and myself as sufferers from a great and perplexing misfortune, in which his greater age and experience must be the guide of both.

When Adrian Warren came I felt certain he had slept but little—that the blow which had fallen upon me had fallen yet more heavily upon him. His manner was quite composed, but his face was pale, and there was a set look of rigid purpose about it, tinged with an expression of grave anxiety. The Deanery drawingroom was a large room, and I was sitting at the end furthest from the door, so the footman had closed it before Mr. Warren and I met. He held my hand for a moment looking at me with an earnest questioning glance. Then he quietly said :

'I am glad to see you looking no worse. Of course the adventure of yesterday must remain a profound secret, so my wife can never thank you herself for the fact that she is not now a widow, our children fatherless. I can only thank you for them. The extent of the service you have done them you can hardly estimate. I can and I feel accordingly. You will believe that.'

His words raised a strange tumult within me. I had not yet fully grasped the position. In my pained absorption of thought over the injury I had unwittingly done Mrs. Warren I had quite lost sight of the unspeakable service I had rendered her. I was too young and inexperienced to readily grasp all sides of a perplexing question. But the words brought other thoughts to me. How thoroughly they justified my confidence! With what exquisite tact he had at once laid down the basis of our future relations. Some might have held his words a kind of

warning. To me they seemed simply an assurance that I might safely trust him.

'I am so glad. I never thought of that,' I replied, answering my own thoughts almost more than his words. He smiled gravely. I think that he understood what I felt better than I did myself.

'I have much to say to you,' he went on. We have a difficult question to settle, the ultimate decision of which must rest with yourself, and there is much that I must tell you, respecting my past life, in order that you may be able to form a sound judgment. Are we safe from interruption?

'Quite,' I replied. 'The servants know you are here on business! No one will come.'

He sat down near me at the window, and was silent for a moment. Then he said. 'It is useless for either of us to affect blindness, where no blindness is possible. I know that you have had a terrible shock, Miss Dormer, it is not so with me. My feelings I have long known, known in fact since the day I first saw you lying insensible in Lord Wichborough's arms. But I think you will do me the justice to admit that I have never betrayed them. Unhappily it is now only too clear that they have, all the same, been influencing you, unsuspected by yourself. Believe me, had the faintest suspicion of the possibility of such a result crossed my mind, I would have thrown up everything rather than expose you to such a risk. It is useless for me to pretend that all the pain and distress I feel is not crossed by a sensation of delight, as keen as I know it is odiously selfish, at the revelation that has come to me. But all such thoughts must be put aside. We must only, once for all, realise the position in which we stand, that we may decide rightly for the future. In justice to myself it is necessary that I should tell you the history of my marriage.' He paused a moment. Then with a faint smile, half melancholy, half bitter, he asked—'Have you believed, Miss Dormer, that my wife was my deliberate choice?'

'I could not,' I answered, in a low voice.

'No, indeed. No more than I am hers. It is a miserable story of abominable deceit, in which (that is my only ray of alleviation) Annie, my wife, was only to blame to the extent of culpable weakness. The facts are simply these. I was settled near York, and there being an old acquaintance between our families I was naturally often at the house of her mother, a widow, and I was fairly intimate with her brothers, although none of the family were favourites of mine. Annie, as I subsequently discovered, had formed an attachment for a worthless, dissipated young fellow, the son of a horse dealer in the neighbourhood, and was obstinately bent upon marrying him. Her mother, a scheming, unprincipled woman, hit upon the idea of making me her tool in breaking off the engagement. Exactly how she carried on her machinations I know not. When I discovered the truth it was too late to undo the mischief, and I shrank from unnecessary investigation of the villany practised upon me. Enough to say she contrived to throw her daughter and me constantly together, and at the same time to foment some quarrel between Annie and her lover. Annie's low spirits and altered looks she then represented to me as the result of a hopeless attachment to myself, and she so misrepresented slight actions on my part that, I being then young, she succeeded in persuading me I had been guilty of conduct calculated to mislead the girl. I fell into the snare, and acted as I conceived honourable feeling demanded. By what devices she induced her daughter to accept me I know not. I never asked. It was only a few months after our marriage I learned the truth. In a moment of irritation my wife let fall some startling words. I need not dwell on the miserable explanation that followed. For our present purpose it is enough that you should know that my wife's affections are not given to me. I cannot credit her with much capacity for deep affection or she could not have acted as she did; but what love she has to give still belongs to the worthless object of her first choice, now an outlaw. She simply gives me the cold fidelity in which, God helping me, I will never fail her. That is the story of my married life, Miss Dormer. Now

you will understand better what has happened, and will not impute to me blame I do not deserve.'

'I am glad you have told me,' was all I could say. To express sympathy was impossible—for me it was dangerous.

'It was necessary you should know,' he simply answered. 'But before we come to any discussion regarding the future, there is another strange episode in my career which you must hear. You must surely have divined that my regard for Mr. L'Estrange is prompted by something more than mere admiration for his very fine character?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'I have always felt certain of that. Indeed I was told, long since, he had rendered you some service.'

'That is a very insufficient expression. He was simply my salvation. But for your cousin, Miss Dormer, I should have stood in the felon's dock.'

'You? Mr. Warren!'

'Yes. It is true, indeed. Although I was guilty only of boyish folly. The only uncommon feature in it is the interposition of so noble a character as Mr. L'Estrange. In order that I might thoroughly learn the routine of business, as well as the more practical work of my profession, my father wished me to go into a business house in London for a couple of years. I hated the prospect, but recognised the advantage, and was duly entered. Mr. L'Estrange was at that time living in chambers in London, and he was very kind to me, inviting me often to visit him, and doing all that lay in his power to keep me on my guard against the temptations which dog any young fellow's steps in London.'

'I got on very well in business, rather too well for my own advantage, for sundry marks of confidence in me were shown, which excited my vanity a little, and I began to think myself a very fine fellow. Unfortunately I was a very good billiard player, which led me gradually into a dissipated set, with which I had not money enough to keep pace. After I had been in London about a year a senior in my department chanced to be seized suddenly with what threatened to be a long and tedious illness. To my no small surprise and gratification I was appointed, with

sundry complimentary remarks, to hold his place for him during his absence. This was rather an unusual mark of confidence, for though there was no difficulty about the work, considerable sums of money would necessarily pass through my hands. A short time after I had, one evening, a most unusual run of luck at billiards, and won a heavy sum. The loser, a man of credit, promised to pay on a certain day, bewailing at the same time his ill luck in having to settle on the following day some heavy bet he had lost. My boyish vanity could not resist the temptation of parading a not, with me, too common command of money. I offered to lend him the sum he required, if he liked, and felt my sense of importance much enhanced by the evident surprise my offer created in the company assembled. It was accepted, and I the next day handed over to him a considerable sum belonging to the firm, to be returned when he paid his debt to me. The whole amount was duly paid me on the day named, when I went to play a friendly game of billiards with the loser. I believe him to have been wholly free from all complicity in what followed, but he had many unscrupulous acquaintances. From my subsequent sensations, I have no doubt drugged wine was given to me, in quantities enough to render me rather stupid, but not actually helpless. Either before I left the house, or on the way home, I was robbed of the whole sum, which, if I was to escape ruin and disgrace, must be replaced within forty-eight hours.

What I suffered during the course of the next day it would be impossible to describe. I returned to my lodgings in the afternoon with the full consciousness that I had only three alternatives from which to choose—suicide, penal servitude, or ignominious flight. When, in the evening, I heard a ring at the door bell, followed by steps approaching my room, I felt so convinced that some discovery had been made, that had I had a pistol at hand I think I should have blown my brains out. The door opened and Mr. L'Estrange was announced.

My guardian angel had intervened. Mr. L'Estrange had never called at my lodgings before; but he told me, afterwards, some

rumour had reached him that I was getting mixed up with a bad set, and he had come with the intention of remonstrating. My haggard looks at once betrayed that something was seriously amiss, and with the kindest insistence he gradually forced the whole story from me. Without a moment's hesitation, without any preliminary lecturing or preaching, he drew out his cheque-book, and wrote out a cheque for the full amount of my debt to the firm, merely saying, as he handed it to me, 'Now, Warren, cash that as you go to business in the morning ; and you must promise to break entirely with the set you have got among, and never to touch a cue again as long as you are in London.'

How readily I gave, and faithfully kept the promise, I need hardly say. But what I have felt towards your cousin since then, I do not think you could well understand, unless you could enter into my sensations throughout that horrible day. Nothing that I can do will ever repay him.'

'It was like Conrad,' I said. 'It was worthy of him.'

'Yes, you are right. And to say that an action is worthy of Mr. L'Estrange, is about the utmost that can be said. But do you understand why I have told you this just now ?'

'No, I do not.'

He was silent for a moment. Then he asked.

'Miss Dormer, do you trust me ?'

'Implicitly,' I answered. 'I am young and inexperienced, and I feel horribly bewildered. I have no one to guide me. I want you to help me to decide what is right. All I want to feel certain about is that I am doing right, and not acting selfishly.'

'And I believe it is possible for you so to act. Weakness would force many girls in your position to act for self, if they wished to avoid doing wrong. But I will tell you just what I think, and you must decide. I asked you if you trusted me because I know the world would unhesitatingly condemn me ; would say that under cover of fair professions I was acting from selfish motives. We have learned—I believe it was inevitable—to love each other only too dearly. An accident has forced that fact upon us as one which must be considered. The world

would say it was my duty at once to arrange to leave the neighbourhood, and avoid ever seeing you again. Were the circumstances ordinary, and were yours an ordinary character, I should most heartily coincide in that judgment. But the circumstances are not ordinary, and I believe that much is possible for you which would not be possible for most girls.'

'I do not understand,' I said.

'I mean that you are strong, true, and fearless, as able as willing to do the right, regardless of personal cost; and far less under the dominion of feeling and impulse than is usual in girls of your age. Of course, for us both, if we considered only ourselves, the best and wisest course would be to part at once, for ever. That would mean my throwing up my appointment here, and going to some place where you would never see or hear of me. But what does that mean for the cousin to whose interests you are devoted, the man to whom I owe a debt which can never be repaid? I fear almost certain loss of his inheritance. The skill with which you have worked on his behalf is, to me, inexplicable in one so young, on any other theory than that of the inspiration under which women who are absolutely unselfish act where anyone they love is in question. I do honestly believe that you and I, acting together, have a fair chance of countering the schemes of a most artful knave. Alone I do not believe either could accomplish it. Now, on what basis is our future action to be founded? Are we to take the course which conventional morality would applaud of acting as is best and wisest for our individual selves, and part at once? Or are we to set conventional morality at defiance, resolve upon a course which must be attended with pain and sorrow, and act solely for the welfare of one dear to both of us?'

'Do you need to ask?' I exclaimed, almost indignantly.

'Not you, I think,' he replied, with a half sad smile. 'But have you counted the cost?'

'I do not care what the cost is.'

He looked very grave then. 'I fear you hardly understand what the cost may be,' he said. 'That is the only dread which

makes me fear to leave with you a decision which yet no one else can make.'

'But you can explain it to me.'

He shook his head. 'No, that is not possible. Experience must do that. For me it is different. I can count the cost. I am prepared to pay it. In truth, I have been paying it constantly since I first saw you. And there is in you so strong an element of the heroic that I believe, coupled with the weak grasp any selfish consideration can hold upon you, it will enable you to do the same. Still, time only can show. If, for your cousin's sake, you determine that there shall be no change in our outward relations, it must be on condition of your giving me a solemn promise.'

'What promise?'

'That you will trust me to the utmost, and should you come to feel it must be so, you will tell me that I must go.'

'I do not understand,' I said. 'I do not like to make a promise I do not understand.'

'You are only making a conditional one—promising that if certain circumstances should arise, you will do something. I only ask that if you come to feel our position an untenable one, you will tell me I must go. Should you ever come to feel that, you will better understand what I mean, and will see that only on the strength of a promise which, if once made, I know you will keep, am I justified, with all the deeper knowledge on my side, springing from age and experience, in allowing you to commit yourself to a decision, the full cost of which you cannot as yet fully estimate. The very confidence you have reposed in me increases my responsibility. If you will not give me your promise, I shall be bound to reconsider the whole question.'

How rapidly it is possible for childhood to merge into womanhood? I think the transformation had been nearly accomplished in me during our conversation. At any rate I was beginning to follow his drift. I replied quietly, but firmly:

'I promise faithfully, that should any future circumstances

make me feel it necessary that we should part, I will not fail in some way to let you know.'

'He drew a long, deep breath, as if some heavy weight had been lifted off him. 'You have decided nobly,' he said. 'God grant you may never in your heart reproach me for having made a martyr of you.'

Little did either of us dream of the full significance of that aspiration! Mr. Charlote's words about a fiery baptism flashed across my thoughts. Was it beginning? I think I hoped it was. I had still a deep veneration for Mr. Charlote, and I thought, if so, it portended I was on the right road. Mr. Warren rose as he spoke, and took up the packet from the table, as though he was about to leave the room. The action seemed to bring me back once more to the practical side of life.

'What will you do about Collier?' I asked. 'You will not allow this horrible attempt to pass unpunished?'

'I must,' he said. 'There is no alternative. No one but yourself could give evidence.'

'But my evidence of what I overheard would be enough.'

'No doubt. But the case would have to come before local men. Unfortunately the connecting link between the conversation you overheard, and my escape, lies in a fact which would ring through the county.' Then in a lower and slightly tremulous tone he added. 'Miss Dormer, you hardly understand, even yet. Go some day and trace the course of your ride. Then you will understand better. Stapleton himself would not have risked it. No man would need to be told what power had nerved a woman'—

His voice broke down, and snatching up his hat he hurried from the room without even a parting salutation.

Do spirits hold voiceless communion, while tongues are framing into the clumsy vehicle of speech a few tattered fragments of the outer fringe of their perceptions? Ever since that day it has seemed to me that they do, for in the undisturbed reflections of that afternoon I seemed to understand and ponder over a great deal which never had been said, or even, in words,

implied, and which only grew clear to me when the senses of sight and sound had no longer any chance to intrude upon the subject. Adrian Warren and I loved each other with a love as true and deep as it was hopeless. With what exquisite tact and skill he had, in all he had said, emphasized that hopelessness without using any assurance which in itself would have been almost an insult. He had avoided even an allusion to the involuntary embrace into which the first startled shock of discovery had betrayed him. No word or look, even when alone, must ever pass between us which would be witness to ourselves of the secret sentiment underlying the external appearance of calm friendliness. For Conrad's sake we were to continue to meet, to act as if calm friendliness was the measure of our regard for each other, and bear unflinchingly whatever that resolution might cost us. As I thought over it, the meaning of the promise I had made began to grow clearer to me. Should the time ever come when the strain was greater than my strength could bear ; when honour and rectitude failed of power to hold love firmly bound in silent bondage, and self gained strength to endanger my coming under the sway of impulse, then I was to trust to him to remove the danger as implicitly as in everything else I had trusted him.

Would I ever make that appeal ? Never. The longer I pondered over our interview, over all he had, and all he had not said, the more I seemed to see his true nobility of soul. And he loved me, would love me and no other woman so long as life should last. His spirit had been crying that to mine, while his lips were framing far other words. Never would I show a weakness unworthy of such a love. Let who might blame me, henceforth the aim and object of my life should be to show myself worthy of the love of Adrian Warren.

CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. MASON'S DEVELOPMENT.

I SUPPOSE I ought to have been very unhappy after that startling revelation, morally overwhelmed with a terrible sense of wrong-doing, sentimentally sunk in the tender melancholy of a life-long sorrow. In truth I was neither one nor the other. I was sobered, and to some extent saddened, but I was no victim to the pangs of remorse, or the anguish of despair.

My religious aspirations were at all times of a very simple and practical character, and might, I think, have been fairly summed up in the earnest desire I had expressed to Mr. Warren with regard to the circumstances of the moment, the desire to do right, and act unselfishly. I made no effort to disguise from myself the depth of the love that existed between Adrian Warren and me. I never sought to justify it. It was an inevitable result of our meeting. We could no more help it than the needle can help turning to the north. What we could, and were bound to help, was that it should ever give rise to any selfish action, any action calculated to bring trouble and distress on others. Had Mrs. Warren loved her husband I should have felt the position much more keenly. Thank God I have never known the pain of stealing, even unintentionally, from any woman the affection of a man she loved. To have stolen a husband's love from a loving wife would, I think, have almost maddened me. Mrs. Warren had, in my estimation, been guilty of one of the basest actions a woman can commit; giving her hand to one man, while her heart is given to another; but she did not stand at my judgment seat. She was Adrian Warren's wife, the mother of his children. Her right was that that fact should be the basis on which his and my mutual relations should be founded.

To the sentimental aspect of the question I think I gave very little attention. I had not been nurtured on Byronic literature, and even had I been, I do not think it was in me to pose as the

heroine of a romantic and ill-fated love story. I was too strong and vigorous, both mentally and physically, for any such part. Moreover, the glimpse I had caught, at school, of sentimental sorrows, had filled me with a great contempt for all such luxuries.

I do not say that at times a feeling of deep sadness, of unutterable yearning, did not steal over me, but I stoutly fought against it. Above all other things I dreaded having to tell Adrian Warren I had not strength enough to carry out the line of action on which we had resolved, that weakness would compel me to act for self, as the only safeguard against the risk of wrong-doing. And danger I intuitively felt lurked in any brooding over personal feeling, and indulgence in introspective sadness. If I was to show myself as strong as Adrian credited me with being, I must not only act, but think only for, and of others.

So I announced to my over indulgent father that I wished to study Greek and mathematics with Mr. Charlote, and have lessons in painting from a first-rate master. I was very fond of music, but I judged it prudent to let it alone. Music seemed to me to be too powerful an exponent of pure emotion to be quite safely cultivated. I might insensibly slide into dangerous communing with the instrument I played upon. Thus, in various ways, I filled up my time so completely, that unless I had wilfully sought them, there was little chance of my finding idle half-hours for dangerous musings.

Still, my sudden overstepping of the boundary between girlhood and womanhood made its mark. Aunt Marion's condemnatory chorus suddenly broke out in a fresh key.

'It is really most lamentable, Vera, that, with all these freaks, you never take a freak of being what a girl of your age should be. What in the world has set you on the notion of becoming a blue stocking.'

'I don't want to be a blue stocking.' I only want to learn Greek and mathematics.'

'The most absurd idea for a woman I ever heard. You will grow quite old before you are twenty-five, if you study so much. You seem already to have grown suddenly much older. You

will have your hair turning grey before you know what you are doing. I am sure that much reading turns the hair grey. I have always avoided it on that account, and look at my hair. You cannot find a grey one anywhere. Woman should never study much, it is ruinous to the complexion, as well as the hair. Not that I suppose you will attend to what I say. You never would.'

'Or I might have become a perfect lady, like Edith Cranley,' I said.

'Nothing of the sort,' she replied sharply. 'You might have been what the Dean of Wichborough's daughter ought to be.'

My thrust was spiteful, I admit. Edith and Captain Mason had been married very shortly after her famous hunting exploit. He was a man of good fortune, and had left the army, and bought a small property near Wichborough, where they had been settled for about two months. Already it had become very apparent that, having burst through the bounds of Close decorum, Edith had blossomed into as thorough-going a flirt as any girl could possibly be.

Aunt Marion left the room as she spoke. Conrad had been sitting reading all the time of our discussion. Presently, as I passed near him to get something I wanted, he suddenly took hold of my hand.

'It is quite true what mother says, Vera, about your seeming much older. What does it mean, dear?'

'I suppose it means that I am growing older,' I replied. 'You would not always have me remain a child, Conrad?'

'It does not mean, then, that there is anything troubling you? The change has been rather a sudden one. You are very much alone in the world, my little cousin. You will come to me if you want help, will you not?'

'Indeed I will,' I said, bending down to kiss his forehead. 'But there is really nothing wrong. I am quite happy.'

That assertion was true enough. I was earnestly, ardently striving to do right, and thus showing myself worthy of Adrian Warren's love. That constituted happiness for me.

' You hit mother rather hard about Mrs. Mason,' Conrad said, after a moment's pause.

' Well, but she does deserve it, Conrad. After having Edith perpetually cast in my teeth from childhood you cannot expect but I should retort. I fully expect soon to see Edith established in the position of her favourite disgusting example.'

' Still, dear, your aunt is not always singularly judicious in what she says and does. For Mrs. Mason's sake I would advise you not to turn her attention more that way than need be.'

' What do you mean, Conrad?' I asked in surprise.

' What do you think Wichborough said to me yesterday?'

' What?'

' That nothing would surprise him less than that Mrs. Mason's friends should come to regret you ever stopped her going over the stone quarry.'

' Conrad!' I exclaimed in amazement.

' That is just what he said, Vera, and you know Wichborough is a man who has seen a vast deal of the world in his time. It seems he met her at a ball at Deansmere the other night, and formed his judgment then. He says her egregious vanity, and inordinate love of admiration, added to her silliness and excitability, are, he thinks, pretty sure, sooner or later to bring her to grief, for she is quite pretty enough to attract a dangerous amount of notice.'

' Poor Edith,' I said. ' But she and Captain Mason are really attached to each other.'

' I doubt if, on either side, the attachment will bear much strain. But at any rate, you see it will be better not to turn mother's attention in that direction.'

' They are coming to dine at the Deanery next week,' I answered. ' Aunt Marion will meet them there.'

' I daresay the Deanery atmosphere will be enough to keep her in check for one evening. But do not you encourage any intimacy with her, Vera. I honestly believe there is no vice in her, as yet at least, though heaven only knows where such characteristics may land her. But a vain frivolous flirt of that

sort is just the person to get those who are about her into ambiguous positions.'

'I do not think there will be much intimacy between us. I have not even seen her since her marriage. We mutually missed each other in calling. Now I must go and pay Colonel L'Estrange a visit.'

It had become quite a matter of course that I was free of the library, a room which Colonel L'Estrange appropriated entirely to himself. His desirable but oppressive partiality for me had by no means decreased. He used to tell me in private that I was the only really sensible person who ever came about the house, and he had once rejoiced my heart, after receiving a long letter from his nephew, by saying to me that he believed Gilbert was a selfish blockhead; from which I opined that that astute personage would have to be cautious enough to render his progress in iniquity slow. I was the recipient also of much exasperating confidence about the sins and shortcomings of Aunt Marion and Conrad, over which, at least as far as Conrad was concerned, my wrath burned fiercely. Regarded from a purely personal point of view, it has a fine moral effect to flame up fiercely in defence of a person unjustly defamed. But where your sole object is to serve the interests of that person, it is a satisfaction which has often to be foregone. No small part of the mental and moral training which carried me safely through the great climax consisted in the constant need in which I lived of exercising stern repression of all outward show of feeling.

The book of which Adrian Warren had spoken had passed in the most easy and natural way in the world into Colonel L'Estrange's hands, and been of service far beyond anything we had calculated upon. Such a collection of absurd rubbish I had not often read. But Colonel L'Estrange was deeply impressed with the marvellous coincidences therein set forth, and one day, chancing to find him making copious notes, a brilliant idea suggested itself.

'I do not think so very much of that book, after all,' I said

'Why not?'

'Some of the stories are absurd. Some have palpably brought about their own fulfilment. I am sure a far better collection might be made. Why should you not make one yourself?'

'Really, Vera,' he said, 'that is an excellent idea. It would be a great amusement to me to write it!'

'You must take great care, then, not to let anyone know what you are doing,' I said. 'Keep it all out of the servants' way, or they will be sure to tell Aunt Marion, and then she will give you no peace, lest you injure your eyesight, or do yourself some sort of mischief, through studying too much.'

Through the best part of the winter Colonel L'Estrange had been busy with this precious production, and in reply to one or two letters from Gilbert Wilbraham, I had been able to report that I saw no diminution of his uncle's superstitious fears about will-making, and did not deem it would be judicious to press him upon the subject.

That projected dinner party, of which I had spoken to Conrad, had been a source of some little trouble to my father and me, when we agreed that it would be necessary to give one in honour of Captain and Mrs. Mason.

'Who in the world shall we ask?' I said. 'Edith is fond of gaiety. She will not relish a solemn Precincts dinner.'

My father arched his eyebrows with an air of mild perplexity. In truth we both felt the neighbourhood was not prolific in the class of guests which were likely to find favour with Mrs. Mason. A dinner at the Deanery could hardly be, under any circumstances, much to her taste. The grave dignity of a Cathedral establishment was not to be lightly overturned by the vagaries of frivolous butterflies.

'I think you had better put Major Fordham down,' my father said.

Major Fordham was one of the officers quartered in Wichenborough. Soldiers then were a different class from soldiers now, and military society was not in much request at the Close. Major Fordham had, however, brought an introduction to my father,

from a well meaning, and not very judicious friend, so an invitation to dinner was a necessity.

I had never seen him until he appeared in the Deanery drawingroom on the evening of that party. He was a very handsome man, of very polished manner, but not one who at all attracted me. Edith did not arrive until all the other guests were assembled. Then she entered in a flutter of volatile enthusiasm, which had the immediate effect of drawing everyone's attention to her. She was 'so delighted' to see 'dear Vera' again, and bubbled over with an amount of vivacity which brought to my mind Lord Wichborough's malicious questions about the fatiguing character of screaming and hysterics. It seemed to me as if this exuberant gaiety must be also rather fatiguing.

She was certainly prettier than ever, but I could not think her improved. The fine veneer of habitual refinement of tone which certainly pervaded the atmosphere of the Close had been rubbed off, and innate vulgarity, though of a kind very different from Mrs. Warren's, seemed to me very apparent; the vulgarity of the incessant self-assertion of a vain woman, thirsting for a perpetual flow of admiration. I do not think I ever saw my father look so thoroughly bored at his own table. Edith's spasmodic chatter and flippant laughter, were certainly a severe discipline for a man of refined and scholarly mind.

In the drawingroom after dinner she attacked me. Why had I not been to see her again? She was dying to see me, and she had so much to do, arranging the house, she could hardly get out at all herself. She had a heap of presents to show me, etc. I managed not to yawn, that was about all. I did not understand this sudden spasm of affection.

Presently Major Fordham came in, and though I was but little instructed in the ways of coquettes, a certain change in Edith struck me, a sort of sudden display of all her ornamental bunting. Major Fordham at once came and joined us.

'I felt tremendously honoured by an invitation to dine at the Deanery,' he said. I had no idea of the great additional pleasure in store for me.'

It seemed a harmless sort of compliment, but a bold, hard look accompanied it. Perhaps my own vanity was a little piqued, we are strangely contradictory beings. I certainly felt an instant wish to say something disagreeable to Major Fordham, and felt sorry I was his hostess. At the moment Lord Wichborough came up.

'Come and look at the moon rising, Vera,' he said.

Major Fordham shot a quick glance from Lord Wichborough to me as if the familiarity of the address had surprised him. A curious look passed over his face. He seemed to me like a man going freely in the hunting field, who suddenly finds the ground is risky. It was a lovely May evening. Every one was occupied, and Lord Wichborough and I stepped out of a window on to the gravel, and stood watching the moon rising over the Court woods. He did not, however, appear much absorbed in the prospect.

'I do not care about your assortment of guests to-night, Vera,' he said.

'Nor I ;' I replied. 'But Mrs. Mason had to be asked.'

'Of course. She appears to be fulfilling her destiny with much energy and perseverance.'

'She always affected vivacity,' I answered, 'but she carries it too far. A little infusion of matronly dignity now would be more becoming and more attractive.'

'Supposing it possible the effort to assume it could be attended with any sort of success,' replied Lord Wichborough dryly. 'But how comes Major Fordham here ?'

'He brought an introduction to my father. Do you know him ?'

'Well, yes and no. Enough to make me wish I had not met him here.'

'Papa was obliged to ask him. I should not think he would care more for the Deanery than the Deanery will care for him.'

'I don't know. Why is L'Estrange not here to-night ? Your cousin I mean.'

'He is not well enough to come.'

Lord Wichborough was silent a moment. Then he laid his hand on my shoulder. 'Vera, my dear child,' he said, 'I am anxious about you. You are getting into a position I do not like, and your father is not fit to take care of you. He has drifted too much into the ways of a learned recluse. Have a care, and keep your eyes open. Don't cultivate much intimacy with Mrs. Mason.'

'I do not think she is likely to give me a chance. For all my Bohemianism I am too solemn and demure for her. I do not think her inclinations will incline her much in the direction of the Deanery.'

'I wish I felt quite sure of that. There are tactics as well as inclinations. Only be on your guard if she does come much about the house. And if it should come to pass that when she happens to call Major Fordham happens to call also, let me know.'

"Oh, Lord Wichborough," I exclaimed, "Edith would never go so far. She is not so bad as that!"

'She is not so bad at all, my dear. If she was she would be more cautious. If you could know the number of thoroughly bad women I have seen carry fair colours all their lives, and come safely into the port of middle age, while merely vain and silly ones, who set out with no thought of evil, came to hopeless grief, you would understand better the danger she is in. What I fear is her compromising you. You have no mother to take care of you, and this is a sort of peril it needs something more than your shrewdness and discretion to safely guard against. Besides, there are two things which I suspect you do not take into much account. One, that you are a very handsome girl, the other that you are a considerable heiress. Major Fordham is a man quite capable of playing a deep and dangerous game. I am not justified in acting on the mere assumption that he will. But on the first hint of danger I will speak to your father. Don't let Major Fordham get any advantage of you.'

'You think that I am likely to be caught by a fascinating

exterior and manner,' I replied in a low voice. ' You need be under no apprehension. There is no danger.'

' No,' he quietly replied, ' I know you are safeguarded.'

I could hardly repress a start. ' What do you mean? ' I asked.

' I am not blind, Vera. The change in you within the last few months is very palpable.'

' Just what Aunt Marion says. She lays it to my studying Greek, and is, I believe, considering the best sort of wig for me to wear, when all my hair falls off. But surely I am not to remain a giddy girl all my life? '

' Talk in that way to your girl friends, my dear. You do not thus take in a man of the world who has passed his half century. A girl does not expand into the full bloom of mental and moral, any more than of material womanhood, all in a moment, without some cause. But I ask no questions. I hope it is all right, dear. At any rate, if you need it, you know where to find a second father, possessed of a little more worldly experience than your own father. I do not fear your being attracted by Major Fordham. What I do fear is, that if you are not very cautious, Mrs. Mason, from sheer folly, he designedly, may succeed in compromising you.'

' Why designedly? ' I asked. ' If he wants to carry on a reprehensible flirtation with Edith, he will surely not give much thought to me.'

' You don't know the world, Vera, which fortunately has never had a chance to corrupt you. A clandestine affair more or less harmless, probably more, with Mrs. Mason, would amuse him, compromising you would be advantageous, through making the world say he ought to propose to you. If he could dare to do that, he would be only too glad, for the sake of your fortune. And if, meantime, he and Mrs. Mason found the situation getting too hot, they would turn round and say that she had merely been in his confidence, and trying to help him to secure you. Then the world would say that being so thoughtless and imprudent it

was lucky you had fallen into the hands of such an honourable, upright man.'

'Is there anything people will not do for money?' I exclaimed, my thoughts flying off to Gilbert Wilbraham.

A sudden titter from behind was the answer. Edith and Major Fordham had come to the window. 'How painfully prosaic,' she said. 'I was just beginning to think we were intruding, and lo, the mercenariness of people in general is under discussion. I do not believe you have a spark of romance in you, Vera.'

'Upon my word,' put in Major Fordham, 'I admire the practical turn of Miss Dormer's mind. It would be an uncommonly useful thing if one could know the exact point at which one might count on people stopping where money is in question.'

'Pray how much more of our conversation did you manage to overhear, Major Fordham?' asked Lord Wichborough carelessly.

'Not a word beyond the last sentence, my lord,' replied Major Fordham in a haughty tone, 'and should not have heard that had not Miss Dormer spoken with some vehemence.'

'Oh, pray do not suppose I have any objection. In fact I am a little disappointed you did not hear more. I think it might have saved me trouble. Good night, Vera. I think I hear my carriage coming round.'

With a distant salutation to the others he turned back into the drawing-room.

'What a dreadful bear Lord Wichborough is,' Edith said. 'I really wonder, Vera, you can think so much of him.'

'I assure you I do not very often think about him,' I replied.

'Now don't be sarcastic. You were always inclined to it, and nothing makes a girl so unpopular as to get a character for sarcasm. Does it, Major Fordham?'

'I cannot easily imagine Miss Dormer being unpopular,' he replied quietly. 'But then some people dominate their characteristics; others are dominated by them.'

I turned and walked into the drawing-room without taking any notice, hearing Edith say, as I did so—

‘Now don’t set up for a Sphinx. I hate enigmatical sayings.’

CHAPTER XIV.

MAJOR FORDHAM RIDES IN THE CHASE.

WHEN all the guests had departed, and my father had gone off to the library, I went and sat down again at the open window, looking out into the clear, soft moonlight. My mind was full of anxious thoughts. Lord Wichborough's words had not produced exactly the effect he intended. It was very well for him to think only of me; was it right for me to think only of myself? He was not aware that I knew of his remark about Edith to my cousin. If she was in danger of a fate which would cause her friends to wish I had not saved her life, was it a time to stand aloof? I had been held worthy of laudation for saving her life at some risk to my own, should I be more worthy of laudation now for holding back from any effort to save her reputation for fear I should chance to get compromised? Compromised in the eyes of whom? The world! What did I care for the world? I had had a few glimpses into that minute section of the great restless ocean of life surging in every part of the country which calls itself the world and society, and I was not enamoured with the spectacle I had beheld. What could I do? That was a more practical question. How could an unsophisticated, inexperienced girl be of any use in such a case? How could a girl only just done growing stop and hold a runaway horse? I had done the one, perchance I could do the other; and if I got ‘compromised,’ well, it would be the fair equivalent to the bruises and shaking my former effort on Edith's behalf had cost me. I had not stopped then to think of the alarm and distress I was causing those who cared for me: must I leave Edith to her fate now for fear of annoyance to them?

Ah! a swift, sharp pain caught me there, and even alone in the calm moonlight I felt a hot flush rise to my face. There was one in whose estimation I could not face the thought of sinking. But would not Adrian divine? Would he believe I could have sunk to the possibility of any action unworthy——. I started away from the train of thought, and went towards the drawing-room door with the intention of going up to my room.

As I did so I came opposite a large mirror, and saw myself reflected from head to foot. Involuntarily I paused, as the remembrance of what Lord Wichborough had said came over me. I was certainly not wont to trouble myself about my looks, and I had no need to think of my dress. Murray, whose mother had been French, and who had exquisite taste, managed all that for me. I knew that my dress was always as nearly perfect as it could be, richer than was common for girls of my age, a necessity, Murray affirmed, of my exceptional position, for which the airy draperies otherwise suitable were not fit, but simple in design, and faultless in workmanship. But as I looked at myself then, I knew Lord Wichborough had spoken truly. And then a sharper pang than that from which I had fled struck me. The image of Mrs. Warren rose before my eyes, seeming to offer itself in contrast to the reflection before me. Something more akin to remorse than I had ever felt smote me—a sort of feeling as though I had used superior strength to maim and crush a weak, helpless creature, and sitting down in a chair close by, I burst into a violent fit of sobbing.

A slight sound made me start up suddenly. Adrian Warren was standing near me, very pale, and looking at me with positive terror in his eyes. I read their meaning as if it had been expressed in the clearest words.

'No, no,' I exclaimed, 'it is not that. I am not weaker than I thought. It was a fit of remorse. I caught sight of my own reflection in the glass, and I felt so cruel, so mean.'

He understood me as perfectly as I understood him. 'I am very glad,' he said quietly, 'but your remorse is uncalled for. That had nothing to do with it. I should not have come in,

only from the distance I caught a sight of you moving about the room, and never thought of startling you. Shall I find the Dean in the library ?'

His appearance was no surprise. Mrs. Warren had carried out her design, and gone off with her two children. Adrian was in lodgings in Wichborough. He had been spending the evening with Conrad, and was returning through the Deanery grounds as his shortest way home. He had in his hand a book my father had asked Conrad to lend him.

'Yes,' I said, 'but wait one moment. I want to tell you something.'

'Only a few moments. It will not be well for me to stay long,' he said, as he sat down.

Then I told him of my conversation with Lord Wichborough, and of my afterthoughts about Edith.

'I think you are quite right,' he said. 'Lord Wichborough has been shaped in the world's mould, to a certain extent, as is inevitable, and he is much attached to you. To me there is nothing in that seething mass of struggling selfishness called society more ghastly than the way in which women will look on while a silly girl is drawn into the vortex of ruin.'

'And if I get compromised ?'

'It will be another leaf in your laurel crown. Good night.'

He left me without another word, and I went up to my room radiantly happy. He would not doubt me whatever happened. And in that world which he had so tersely summed up Major Fordham was held to be quite an acquisition, while Adrian Warren would merely be tolerated, half under protest. It was surely good to be a Bohemian !

Aunt Marion preserved a grim silence regarding Mrs. Mason. I had seen her watching her with no friendly glances at the Deanery, but I suppose my sharp retort had warned her that I had too good a memory to render it expedient to flaunt Edith before me as a danger signal. She was eloquent, however, on the subject of Major Fordham.

'A most delightful man, quite fascinating, and so well informed.

I have not seen anyone I have taken so strong a liking to for a long time. I have always disapproved of your father taking any notice of the officers quartered here, most dissipated, unprincipled men generally. I am really quite glad in this case he has made an exception to the rule.'

For a while things ran on smoothly. Edith showed an inclination to come often to the Deanery, and she sorely tried my patience with her flippant gaiety and frivolous chatter. I inwardly sighed for the arrival of the autumn, when Canon Cranley would be in residence, and she would not have the same excuse for making the Deanery her resting place when she came into Wichenborough, which it struck me she did more frequently than was altogether necessary. One day she came rushing in in great excitement.

'Has the Dean had a note from Major Fordham?' she asked.

'Yes, inviting him to bring me to a ladies' luncheon he is giving.'

'Yes, he told me, and begged me to come and see you. He said he didn't believe the Dean would come, and he wanted you very much to come. He asked me to settle with you to come with Charlie and me. He would like to have asked Mrs. L'Estrange, but he can't do that, because neither Colonel nor Mr. L'Estrange have ever called upon him.'

'I am much obliged to Major Fordham, but I have no intention of going.'

'Vera, how ridiculous you are. You do not know what an important person Major Fordham is. He is free of all the best houses in London, and quite an authority at the clubs. I can tell you it is not often he troubles himself to show any attention to an unmarried girl. You do not know what a compliment he is paying you.'

'At any rate,' I replied, 'it is one I can quite well do without, and have no intention of accepting.'

'Well, you are very foolish. How in the world do you ever expect to get married, if you shut yourself up here in the way you do?'

'I have no intention of getting married.'

'Oh yes, girls always say that, and are thoroughly disgusted when their intention is carried out. When you find you have lost your chance, you will wish you had taken the advice of those who know better than yourself.'

Meaning the frivolous moth before me, whose pretty painted wings were circling ever nearer to the relentless flame, and to save whom I was resolving to stand some scorching myself, if it must be so. There was a grim sort of irony in our mutual aims and position.

'What one loses, another gains,' I replied. 'Major Fordham can transfer his favours to some more appreciative damsel. I am much obliged to him for his invitation, but the answer is irrevocable—"declined with thanks."

Edith, after a little more lecturing, took her departure, evidently more chagrined than seemed natural. Lord Wichborough's words came back to my thoughts: 'Major Fordham is a man quite capable of playing a deep and dangerous game.' Was he already playing the game Lord Wichborough had afterwards more clearly sketched? And what had brought Lord Wichborough to the opinion he had expressed?

I was revolving the question that afternoon, while I enjoyed a solitary ramble in the Chase, on a beautiful little cob my father had given me, to replace the venerable Flash, now enjoying a peaceful old age in the Deanery paddock, when who should I suddenly espy approaching on horseback, but Major Fordham himself. I was furiously angry. He was not the man to seek enjoyment in lonely rides through romantic scenery. I felt instantly certain he was in search of me. If he tried that, I would lead him a dance. He was, however, too good a tactician to assume a character for which he was wholly unfit.

'Providence has befriended me, Miss Dormer,' he said, as we met. 'I am hopelessly lost. I have been in Buckton, and thought I could cut across the Chase, back to Wichborough. I have not the faintest idea in what direction I am riding. I was

just beginning to think of the babes in the wood, and look out for robins.'

'I doubt if you will see any,' I replied. 'I think they have all fled. There are hawks about.'

He shot a keen glance at me, but my power of control over my features had greatly increased within the last few months, and I think he was completely baffled. I proceeded with great circumstantiality to describe the route he must follow.

'Good heavens,' he exclaimed, 'I shall never make it out. I am the worst hand in the world at following a direction. It's abominably awkward; I must be at the barracks in a short time, for regimental business.'

I saw what he wanted, and apparently fell into the trap straightway.

'There is a shorter way,' I said, 'but I could hardly describe it. I could show it to you.'

'And would you be so very kind?' he asked, with, I must allow, a most winning manner, but for a certain keen instinct, which true Bohemians, I believe always possess.

'Certainly, I will,' I answered, with much readiness, and I caught a momentary gleam on his face. I imagine that silly little flies were only too wont to walk readily into his parlour. 'We must go back a little distance along the road you have come,' I said, and he turned and rode beside me.

He was certainly a most fascinating man. I imagine on that occasion he laid himself out to be so. I suppose I was not altogether above feminine weaknesses, for I admit that under the influence of his happy combination of manliness and grace I was beginning to relent. Had he continued to chat, as he did at first, on indifferent topics, I believe I should have led him by a safe path to the high road. But at last he floundered into a fatal blunder.

'I was so sorry to hear from Mrs. Mason, this morning, that you are inexorable about my little luncheon, Miss Dormer. I met her after she had been with you. I am not much surprised, I confess, I know we soldiers are looked upon with suspicion

in such a circle as yours, and not unnaturally. I should like, however, to have shown you that there are differences.'

Nothing could have been said, with a more perfect manner, but in an instant I grew remorseless. If he had met Edith Mason after she left the Deanery, he had never been near Buckton. He had not had time to do it, without an amount of hard riding, which could not have left his horse in the condition in which it was. With an absolutely hardened heart I answered.

'It is very kind of you to wish to see us, but my father does not go out very much now. He is a little of the recluse in his habits.'

'But you. I daresay you think Mrs. Mason too young for an escort. Of course I cannot ask Mrs. L'Estrange. But is there no one I could ask, whose acceptance might insure my not being disappointed of—of the main object of the party?' he added, in a lower and softer tone.

I have never wondered since then at that man's success. Anything more fascinating than his manner, more winning than the glance he turned upon me, I have never seen. I believe that even for me it was well then that I was safeguarded. A sudden impulse took me.

'There is but one person,' I replied, 'whom, in my father's absence, I should care to accompany under the circumstances, and that is Lord Wichborough.'

I never saw a man's face change so suddenly. I knew at once Lord Wichborough had some good grounds for his opinion. Major Fordham's face grew as hard as adamant, and there was a sort of gleam as of cold steel in his eyes, as he said haughtily:

'I fear, then, I must bear my disappointment as best I may.'

My heart was beginning to beat a little quicker. Major Fordham was about to find out that artful games were double edged weapons. He thought I had walked into his parlour, he had walked into mine. The road appeared just before us, to turn to the right, but there was no exit. We were in a *cul de sac*, closed by a low, ragged hedge, with a deep drop on the other side, where the ground, sloping downwards from the first, became

almost immediately, a steep bank. It was a jump requiring care, and a good horse, the one way. I doubt if even Swallow could have taken it the other way. The cob knew the place well, and would do it easily. But Major Fordham was far too thorough a horseman to attempt it on the horse he was riding.

Without a moment's pause, merely saying—'We must take this. Mind, there is a drop'—I put the cob at it. We were over in a moment. Then I looked round. Major Fordham had pulled up short.

'Good Lord!' he exclaimed, 'but I cannot take that on this horse. He is not up to my weight.'

'You don't say so?' I replied innocently. 'Well that is very awkward, for you see I cannot come back.'

'Is there no way I can get round?'

'None. It is most unfortunate. I am afraid I cannot help you any further. Very funny, is it not, to be so close to each other, and yet so far off? I am afraid you must just go back, and try to follow the directions I gave you. I hope you won't be late at the barracks.'

My old reckless self had fairly broken through the graver mood which was now more habitual with me, and I imagine my whole face was alight with mischievous merriment. I never saw such a variety of expressions struggling for mastery on any human face, as then upon Major Fordham's. Anger, mortification, admiration, and a certain amount of involuntary amusement, at the manner in which he had been tricked, seemed to be all mingled together. He did not speak audibly, but if there had been a gleam of cold steel in his eye before, there was forked lightning in the glance he shot at me as, lifting his hat, he turned away; and that scathing glance, I am very sure, by the movement of his lips, was accompanied by an oath. I was not unfrequently subject to fits of repentance for the results of my reckless moods and before the cob and I had reached the bottom of the steep bank upon the top of which we had lighted, I began to misdoubt whether, for Edith's sake more than my own, I had

not done ill in running the risk of making an enemy of Major Fordham.

A few weeks after that ride, which at least had one good result, for I saw no more of my adversary in the Chase, one afternoon when my father was out, and Conrad was with me in the drawing-room, Major Fordham was announced. I thought he looked the least thing disconcerted at sight of Conrad, but he made his apologies with the utmost grace. I really forgot what the excuse was for asking for me, some permission respecting something about the Cathedral, I think. Then he sat down and talked in his most brilliant style, rather more to Conrad than to me. I sat counting the seconds. It only wanted a few moments to the hour when a groom was to start with some notes and messages of my father's, which I had to give him. My suspicions were strongly excited by this visit. At last the footman opened the door.

'Holt is ready, miss,' he said.

'I will speak to him. The letters are in the library.'

I went and got the letters, delivered them at the door myself, with instructions, and when the man had ridden away, stood lingering in the porch. I had not long to wait. The messenger had hardly passed out of sight when Edith appeared. I waited for her, and quietly conveyed her to a morning-room I sometimes used, which was on the opposite side of the hall from the drawing-room.

Watching her as she chattered, I could see she was not quite herself. She was evidently listening. She was in the midst of some remark when the drawing-room bell rang. She actually stopped dead for a moment. Then Major Fordham's voice was distinctly audible in the hall. She thought he was arriving, and I could see she was greatly puzzled by the dead silence which followed his exit, in dire wrath, I doubt not, from the house. She grew quite fidgetty. I had silently taken my resolution, and after a few moments, I quietly said—

'It is no use your getting into a fidget, Edith. Major Fordham is gone.'

I caught her off her guard, as I expected. She had no more presence of mind than of yore. 'Gone?' she repeated. Then she coloured deeply, seeing how she had betrayed herself.

'Yes,' I coldly replied. 'I do not allow meetings of that sort in my drawing-room. I took care to prevent it.'

'Vera!' she exclaimed, 'how dare you accuse me of such a thing?'

'Don't try heroics,' I answered; 'it is no use. When you interrupted my conversation with Lord Wichborough, the night you dined here, he had just been begging me to let him know if ever you and Major Fordham arrived at the house, as if by chance, almost at the same time.'

Edith tried to assume a majestic air. 'Lord Wichborough at least shall find out I have a husband who can protect me from insult.'

'You will take good care to say nothing about it to your husband,' I replied. 'You are only making yourself absurd. Listen to me a moment, Edith. I would fain serve you if I can. You think I am an inexperienced girl, but I am not so inexperienced that I do not see the danger into which you are drifting. Other people have seen it. I saved your life once, and I know it has been prophesied that your friends would live to regret that I ever had done so. That was a strong thing to say.'

She looked rather scared. 'Who said it?' she asked.

'It was not said to me. I only heard of it. I will tell you something Lord Wichborough said of you. He said you were not bad, you would be more cautious if you were, and that it was just because you meant no harm, and were thoughtless and fond of admiration, you would get into trouble. Of course I do not know whether you and Major Fordham made an appointment to meet here, but I am very sure you each came knowing the other would be here. How can you be so foolish, so reckless? You are just like a child, sacrificing a gem for the sake of a counterfeit. What good will Major Fordham's discreditable admiration do you if it makes a breach between you and your husband?'

'How you preach, Vera! You are a regular old maid.'

'And you are a woman trifling with her husband's affection, and her own good name. I think I have the best of the bargain.'

'You are insolent,' she said.

'No, I am only dealing truthfully with you. Plenty of people will say nothing to your face, only talk against you behind your back, and seem quite friendly, until you get into some scrape, then they will turn their backs upon you. I want to make you pause and think before you do get into trouble. What I say, I say to your face.'

'Yes, I believe that, Vera. No one ever found you out facing two ways. But you are talking nonsense.'

'It is no nonsense. You know quite well if anything of this sort came to Captain Mason's knowledge there would be trouble. Have you no self-respect? What a humiliation for you that I, a girl younger than yourself, should have to interfere in this way, and keep you out of my drawing-room, because a certain man is there. Think of what I say, and give up this folly ere you get drawn further than you intend, and find yourself so entangled that you cannot free yourself.'

I paused, but she did not say anything. I saw, however, that I had made some impression, so I tried the only piece of pathos possible to me. I had no affection for her, and I could not stimulate it.

'Don't make me regret, Edith, that I saved your life, at the risk of my own; that I did not leave you to be killed in the quarry with your horse. What must people think when they even dream of a possibility that might have been a preferable fate to what may be in store for you?'

She shuddered. 'No one had any right to say such a thing,' she said. 'Still, perhaps you are right. It is foolish to run such risks. Charlie is a little inclined to be jealous, I admit. But I was always full of spirits. I know I do rather mad things when I get excited. You are a horrid old maid, Vera. Still, I admit, you are not altogether wrong this time. I will be more cautious.'

With that she took an affectionate, but rather subdued leave, and went her way. I was sure she was in earnest, but for how long would her frivolous nature retain the impression made? Not ten minutes, I decided, if Major Fordham looked into her eyes as he had looked into mine, and spoke in the low musical tones he had tried upon me. Even I, safeguarded, and made of very different material, had felt his influence. What chance for a butterfly like Edith to do, or be anything but what he chose she should do, or be?

CHAPTER XV.

IN THE MOONLIGHT.

I DID not greatly felicitate myself over that interview with Edith Mason. I vaguely felt them, what I came to recognise afterward, that I was too young, too crude in development, too narrow in range, for the task which I had, not undertaken, rather had forced upon me. Had I dearly loved her, it might have been different. Then, perhaps, that inspiration in which Adrian Warren had seen the source of my power to work for Conrad's interests might have exerted its influence, notwithstanding the unfitness of the instrument through which it acted. But I had neither the strong personal affection for her which would in itself have been an inspiration of wisdom, nor those softened methods which are born of the mellowing influence of deeper insight, wider sympathies, and ripened experience, gradually toning down the impatient directness of youthful vehemence. I knew I had startled her with the sudden revelation that her foolish trifling with an unprincipled man had been the subject of more comment than she was aware; but I believed then that the sentiment thus excited in her was principally dread lest any remarks thereon should reach her husband's ears. I did not then know that at heart he was somewhat of a despot, and that she stood really more in awe of him than appeared; that

though not one of the petty tyrants of domestic life, he was a man from whom, should graver circumstances call forth the qualities, violence and harshness might be expected.

For some time I heard very little of her, and, in truth, thought very little about her. She and her affairs were after all but a mere episode to me, and I had had a letter from Gilbert Wilbraham which brought back to my mind Adrian Warren's expressed dread that some of the servants at the Court were tools of Gilbert's. Did I think, he asked, that his uncle spent too much time in studying and writing? From some of his recent letters he feared he did, and that it was having an injurious effect on his irritable brain. He had not been formerly wont to write or study very much. Did I know of any reason for his forming such a habit?

The astute Gilbert did not count upon comparing of notes. I showed the letter to Adrian Warren on the first opportunity. He shook his head over it.

'It increases my suspicions,' he said. 'I happen, by a chance remark that Colonel L'Estrange let fall the other day, to know that he has not written to his nephew for a very long time. Some one else has suggested that idea. Can you form no conjecture, Miss Dormer? Of course I never see any of the servants, save the men who wait at dinner.'

'Nor I,' I replied, 'with the exception of Aunt Marion's maid, by chance sometimes. Murray always goes with me, if I go to stay at the Court. Baxter is an old family servant of the Dormers; there is no fear of her.'

'I wish I had an idea who it can be. I live in perpetual dread that with a spy in the house some slight accident may bring it to Colonel L'Estrange's knowledge that you and I are both working for his son's interests. If that happened I believe he would do something desperate at once.'

'I am sure, as yet, all is safe,' I said. 'He wearies me to death over his tiresome manuscript, and is most confidential. I am always trying to impress upon him the importance of keeping it a profound secret.'

'Yes, so far I believe all is well. But we are always on the top of a volcano. I feel as if I hardly dared to take a step for fear the crust should break through. In the mere routine of business there are so many things come up which require to be treated with great caution. I am always in dread of saying or doing something which may excite his suspicions that the interests of the heir are in my thoughts. It is a weary business, and it may go on for years.'

'If Mr. Wilbraham can hold out.'

'I fear he is being backed up, on his chances, at enormous cost of course. But if so, as long as he has a chance, his head will be kept above the water for him. We can but work on, and hope.'

He spoke wearily, and he had certainly aged a good deal. I think the strain of the position was telling more on him than on me. With the fuller grasp of his maturer years he probably realised more vividly than I did to what absolute loneliness we were both doomed. The young have vivid pictures of the future, but very little real grasp of what the long stretch of an ordinary life is. I think it was often in Adrian Warren's thoughts that a few years, at best, would end at once the need and the possibility of our being constantly together, and then —. Besides, where love is mutual, I think such a position as ours must always involve a severer strain upon a man than upon a woman.

In addition to my constant absorption with the state of affairs at the Court, another source of some anxiety was beginning to occupy much of my thoughts. Even as early as the spring I had not thought my father looking well, and through the earlier part of the summer I had watched the growth of a symptom which I did not at all like. He began to be subject to occasional fits of irritability, not lasting or serious, but so foreign, in every way, to his genial, easy temperament, that I could not observe them without some uneasiness.

Towards the close of summer my fears were fully justified. A violent ringing of his dressingroom bell startled all the household about eight o'clock one morning. Cumming had gone, as usual,

to his room in the morning, and on returning, in a few minutes, with something for which he had asked, found him lying on the floor. The previous symptoms were all accounted for. It was a severe shock of paralysis, affecting partially the whole of one side, but rendering the leg entirely useless.

They were a terrible few weeks that followed, clinching more firmly, I think, my acquired habit of preserving a cold expressionless exterior, let what might seethe below, than any other discipline could have done. Aunt Marion was something appalling, scolding, lecturing, and lamenting by turns ; in reality, almost frantic with selfish dread of a malady to which she believed there was a family tendency. I do not think there was a single thing, from the gipsy propensities of my childhood onwards, to which she had ever taken exception, which she did not now bring forward as one of the probable predisposing causes which had brought on this attack ; and through it all, the undercurrent of personal irritation that she should thus have been exposed to a shock of sudden alarm on her own account, was so apparent, that it was sometimes almost more than my utmost resolution could stand.

By the middle of October my father had somewhat rallied, but the doctors made no secret to me of their opinion that he would never recover more than very partial use of his arm and leg, and that they did not think his life, which a second shock must almost certainly end, could, under any circumstances, be prolonged beyond a year. They advised all the arrangements of the house being gradually readjusted so as to suit a condition of partial helplessness on his part.

Of course through all this time I had seen and heard little of any one beyond the Deanery and Court. My father did not like me to be long away from him, and my brief absences from his room were mostly spent in securing fresh air and exercise. To the scandal of the Close I rode and walked about as usual, and did not encourage the sympathising support of tearfully affectionate friends.

Thus I had heard little or nothing of Edith Mason, beyond a

somewhat viciously emphasised remark from Miss Duncombe, one day when I met her, just after parting from Edith and her mother at the Cathedral door, that Mrs. Mason seemed much fonder of the Close now than she used to be when it was her home. But a lovely, mild October night, when the moon was full, tempted me out about nine o'clock in the evening, after I had left my father for the night. I had strolled about the grounds for a short time, thinking over the various arrangements it would be desirable to make with a view to his future comfort, and at last made my way into the debatable land. The door which led on to the high road was always locked when the Deanery gardeners left off work, but each of the canons had a private key. There was no danger, therefore, of any intrusion at night, other than from some resident in the Close. I had strolled slowly along the path which led to that door, when I heard, just as I came close to it, a soft whistle from the outside, a whistle of one or two notes, evidently a signal. Rather startled, I paused, and then caught the sound of light footsteps on the gravel path I had come along. A bend in the path prevented me from seeing who it was, and involuntarily I stepped on to the grass, and drew back behind a shrub. The figure of a woman came along the path, but the shadow was too deep to let me do more than see it was a woman. Then I heard the sound of a key in the lock, and of voices speaking softly, but not so softly but that I recognised them as those of Edith and Major Fordham.

'You little gipsy, what a time you have kept me,' he said.

'I am so sorry. I could not help it. I was only supposed to be going to the Deanery, and some one came in, so I had in civility to wait, and there is not much time now. The carriage is to come at ten o'clock, and then I am to pick up Charlie at the barracks.'

'Where I left him very happy,' said Major Fordham with a laugh.

She laughed too. 'This sort of thing is awfully foolish, you know,' she said.

'Not a bit of it. It is awfully jolly. One can't always be good and proper in this world. But we mustn't stand talking here so near the road. Voices are easily heard on such a still night.'

'And we must not sit on the seat beside the path, that is quite clear. Come away to the bench under the acacia.'

I drew back noiselessly, still closer in against the shrub, in whose deep shadow I was standing. I knew that to reach the seat in question they would cross the grass close to me—a seat which had been a favourite one of Edith's and her husband's in the days of their courtship. How could she suggest it?

They passed close to me on the other side of the shrub. But I saw them distinctly enough as they slowly sauntered across the grass in the direction of the seat, which was out of sight of where I stood, behind a clump of shrubs. I watched them with a sinking heart. Poor silly moth, with, I believed, wings as yet unscorched, and that pitiless, relentless flame so fearfully close.

What should I do? I stood for some time hesitating what course I should take. Then I heard a sound which made my heart beat fast, that of the door, which Edith had left unlocked, slowly opening. The movement I had made to avoid being seen by them as they crossed the grass had brought me in view of the road, but I was standing where the shadow was very deep. The moon was shining full on the outer side of the wall, so, as the door was opened, the figure entering stood for a moment in the full light. It was Captain Mason.

For a moment I stood petrified. Then, as I saw he paused to close the door very softly, one of those sudden impulses on which I often acted, when startled, seized me. I had on a soft gown which made no rustling. Keeping the bush between me and the door, as nearly as I could judge, I flew across the grass, round the clump of shrubs, and burst in a moment on the startled pair.

'Your husband is coming, Edith,' I whispered. 'Fly at once.'

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She started up, but instead of flying, she stood, pallid and trembling, staring at me.

'Quick,' I murmured; 'straight on and through the Deanery grounds.' I even seized her by the shoulders, in my dread she would linger till too late, and turning her head in the right direction, gave her a push. Then she fled fast enough.

'Sit down,' I said to Major Fordham. 'I think he will come straight here.'

With a self-possession which was terribly significant, he seated himself again, in a perfectly easy attitude. I, trembling in every limb, sat down beside him.

'We had better throw out a hint, in the shape of the sound of voices,' he said composedly. 'This is a most remarkable episode.'

I could not have answered, but it was not necessary. Almost as he spoke Captain Mason stepped suddenly round the shrubs, right in front of us.

I never saw a man so completely taken aback. He stood motionless, staring at me as if utterly bewildered. It was a cruel moment to me. Never in all my life did I feel so overwhelmed with shame and humiliation as I did then.

'Mason,' said Major Fordham, with a perfectly assumed air of half indignant surprise, 'this is a most extraordinary intrusion!'

'I am sure I most humbly beg Miss Dormer's pardon,' said Captain Mason, with a perceptible sneer. 'I was under a most thorough misapprehension. *She* is the last person I should have dreamed of finding here, under the circumstances.'

Slightly touching his hat, he was turning on his heel, when Major Fordham interposed.

'Stay a moment, Mason. You are under an unpardonable misapprehension now. I am indebted to your wife for this interview, perhaps not very judiciously planned, in order that I might plead my cause with Miss Dormer, and try to induce her to become my wife. That no such happiness is in store for me I now know. But you must not leave here with any mistakes as to Miss Dormer in your mind.'

'I am glad you have explained,' Captain Mason said. 'I deeply regret my intrusion.'

Without another word he turned and walked away, ere I had time to interpose.

The tumult of my thoughts and sensations would not let me move. I could only shrink as far as the seat would let me from my odious companion, and bury my face in my hands. All at once my attention was arrested by Major Fordham speaking in a low grave tone of voice. There seemed to be even a ring of sadness in it.

'It is hard to keep company with pitch, and not get stained, Miss Dorner, and I am not going to deny that it is hard for any woman to come in contact with me, and not suffer to some extent. But one thing I can truthfully say, and that is, that I never regretted the fact so bitterly as I do to-night.'

I could not answer, and after a moment's pause he went on : 'Will you forgive me for what I said ? I know the suggestion is an insult to you, but it was the only possible way I could think of at the moment to clear you without undoing your noble heroic action. For the falsehood I alone am responsible. But indeed it was less of one than it seems. I do not profess to be anything but a bad man, but I should like for once to tell you the honest truth. I confess, when first I saw you, I resolved to try and make some impression on you. Your genuine indifference piqued me, and the cool way you trapped me in the chase strengthened the feeling. I very soon saw the case was hopeless, but I think my admiration for you only increased. I only told Mason I had done what I should do right joyously, if I dared. You have done to-night one of the noblest things I think a woman can do, risked painful imputations in order to save another from more serious disaster.'

'Yes,' I burst in passionately, 'risked sharp wounds to try and save a helpless creature from the claws of a bird of prey.'

'You have the right to be severe,' he answered quietly. 'I daresay you think I am not speaking truthfully now. That also I have no right to resent. But, believe me, I am not sunk so

low that I cannot admire and respect women whose regard I can never hope to win. I want, if I can, to induce you to believe that I do most profoundly respect you, and that I am honestly telling you the plain truth, because of what I want to say to you before we part.'

'How am I to be sure you are not deceiving me?' I asked.
'How am I to know I am not being deluded by the fascination of your manner? It is perfect when you choose.'

'I know it is,' he said simply. 'I might, else, have been a better man. I don't know how I can prove to you I am speaking the truth. I don't profess, remember, to be suddenly reformed. I simply say that I am not sunk so low that I cannot be touched by such noble conduct as yours to-night, and that I want to make the utmost reparation I can to you for the unfortunate position in which I have entangled you.'

'That you can never do.'

'Not entirely, I know. But I know two things about you; one, that you will gladly bear almost anything that may save trouble and disaster to others; the other, that I shall go nearer to win your forgiveness for the annoyance I have unintentionally caused you by aiding the success of your generous self-sacrifice, than by anything else I can do. Now I know that when you have time to think, doubts will come over you as to what you have done.'

'No,' I said. 'I shall not regret it.'

He paused for a moment. There seemed to be a most unwanted hesitation, almost diffidence in his manner. 'I did not say "regret," Miss Dorner, I said "doubt," I . . . I mean that the question will come before you from Captain Mason's point of view, and doubts will spring up in your mind whether you are not doing him a serious wrong. No, do not interrupt me, he interposed, as in my first startled suspicion of his meaning I had uttered a half audible exclamation; 'you have done that too much already, and made my utterances very disconnected and incoherent. Believe what is the truth; that you have, for the moment, roused my better nature into activity,

and that I only want to aid you with the experience of a thorough man of the world. Rest perfectly satisfied that you have no cause for self-reproach, on Captain Mason's account. His wife has been recklessly imprudent, but she has been nothing worse as yet. You have saved her. I honestly admit her pretty face and light-hearted gaiety had made an impression on me. We have met here more than once already, and I had made up my mind to persuade her to elope with me when we leave here, which we shall do shortly. You know her, you can judge whether I should have succeeded. Now she is safe enough from me. Bad I am, heaven knows, but not so bad as that I would rob your noble sacrifice of its reward. She has had a warning which should surely check her folly, for it is nothing worse. She is not bad as yet, and no fear of a wrong to her husband need trouble you. I hope and trust no scandal may spring up out of this foolish business, but we cannot tell. Something must have brought Mason here. If you have to pay for your generous heroism you will at least know that it has saved the utter shipwreck of a silly woman to-night. And rest assured of this, if any hint of what has happened gets abroad, all Wichborough shall hear that I am a rejected man ; and that my respect for you, if possible, surpasses my admiration.'

My agitation had calmed down as I listened to him. Was all this true ? That was the question which rose in my mind. He had glided into a wholly new phase of character with an ease and readiness which made the transformation a shade suspicious ; and which, at any rate, were darkly significant of the coolness of a veteran under circumstances which would certainly somewhat try the composure of a novice. Was this a perfect piece of acting, designed to work upon an eligible heiress, who had accidentally got behind the scenes, as far as ordinary tactics went ? I got up, and standing before him, looked full into his face. It looked pale, in the white light of the moon, but the eyes which looked up into mine, as I stood before him, were soft and sad, with an expression in them I had never seen before.

'You have appeared very suddenly in a new character,' I

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said. 'How am I to know that it is anything more than a clever piece of acting, designed to make a favourable impression on me? You know that I am young, and know little of the world. How am I to tell you are not wilfully deceiving me for a purpose?'

'I cannot prove it to you,' he said. 'There is no way. If you could know what the women are who are mainly responsible for men such as I am being what we are, and estimate the contrast between them and yourself, you would better understand that a man must be worse than I am before he could fail, under such circumstances as these, to have whatever good there is in him aroused into sufficient activity to prevent him being able to indulge in deliberate and most rascally lying. Every word I have said to you is perfectly true, and my motives simply what I assign. But I can only assure you of the fact. I cannot prove it.'

There was a sort of patient humility in his tone and manner which touched me, 'I believe you, Major Fordham,' I said, 'and thank you for having tried to do the best you could under the circumstances.'

'You only do me justice. Should this unlucky business take a turn, which I earnestly hope it may not, you will be convinced that my only object is to insure the success of your generous self-sacrifice, and shield you as much as possible from the consequences. And now, the sooner we part the better. Fortunately I had kept Mrs. Mason's key. You will lock the door after me, will you not?'

He rose as he spoke, and we walked in silence towards the door. When we reached it he paused.

'It is many a long year, Miss Dormer,' he said, 'since I have sat under the soft moonlight alone with a woman I could profoundly respect as well as heartily admire. If you could know what sad memories have thus been aroused, memories of pure, true love, and the ardent hopes and aspirations of youth, you would better understand the momentary change in me which has naturally excited your suspicion, and would believe that I

am in no mood to-night for acting a part, or telling lies. There is no hope for me in life. But if there was in this world a man who for any reason I specially wished to see blest above all other men, I should wish for him that he might win your love in time to let that love make him all it would make him.'

He had touched a cord which had vibrated too strongly to let me speak. I only held out my hand. He took it, held it for a moment while he seemed to scan my face, as if to read there whether I really believed him, then dropped on one knee, and printed a gentle but fervent kiss upon it. In another moment I was alone.

The deep tones of the Cathedral clock, striking ten, fell on my ears as I made my way swiftly back to the Deanery.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WOLF AND THE LAMB.

THE soft October moonlight had no further charm for me, although involuntarily I seated myself in my ordinary place by the open drawingroom window, to try and evolve definite thoughts and sentiments out of the chaos of my bewildered sensations. One question at once forced itself into prominence, a question which has never, for me, been absolutely determined. Had Major Fordham been really true in word and deed that night? or had he merely, with all the readiness of an accomplished profligate, sought to turn to good account a wholly unexpected phase of circumstances? It is true the charm of his manner, while he was actually speaking, had forced me to give credence to his sincerity; but now doubts would rise again. Still, in the main, I assented then, and always have assented, to the more generous solution of the question. Something of admiration for my impulsive interference, in order to shield Edith, I believe had influenced him. But I think his parting words touched the key-note of his mood. That the scene and circum-

stances roused memories of happier times, of youthful hopes and pure true love, and inspired him for the moment with a desire to play an unselfish part, and aid the success of an action which he deemed a noble one. How far his more unselfish aspirations may have been mingled with the dross of ulterior designs, and desire to get safely out of an awkward business, I know not. But that he was, in the main sincere, I do believe. There was a genuine ring in both tone and manner, which, I believe, no histrionic effort could have imparted to them.

Yet never, I am sure, was a girl of my age less affected by such a mood and such sentiments towards herself, on the part of such a man as Major Fordham. My mood towards him was of the bitterest, for I was forced to admit he had laid me under an obligation. He had not only adroitly, and at some personal cost, dexterously shielded me, as far as was possible, from the worst imputations to which my impulsive interference on Edith's behalf exposed me, but he had foreseen, and with much tact warded off from me painful and distressing doubts. He had altogether acted in a manner which forced me to feel grateful to him; about the most repugnant necessity which could have been laid upon me. Already, but for his carefully expressed assurances, cruel doubts as to the justifiability of what I had done would have been at work within me. In the whole episode there was but one satisfactory circumstance, and that was that the conditions under which it had occurred would prevent all chance of scandal, and I ruminated long over my future programme, resolving that I would give Edith very distinctly to understand that either she must change her line of conduct, or all acquaintance must cease between us; that I was not prepared constantly to run such risks on her account.

A justifiable satisfaction, and a prudent programme certainly. Only, unfortunately, at twenty years of age one does not invariably forecast with strict accuracy the course events are likely to take, and in my youthful inexperience I gave little heed to the ominous foreboding which greater knowledge of the world had aroused in Major Fordham's mind. I confidently anticipated a

visit from Edith the next morning. I had surely done her a service which merited some acknowledgement, in addition to the creation of a situation which required some little consideration, and I meditated much upon what I would say. I detested the thought of playing the prig, and shrank from the appearance of kicking a fallen foe, and both risks dogged every sentence of what I wanted to say. I spent the whole morning in trying to frame a fitting outline of my discourse, and had about succeeded in making it, as I thought, both impressive and definite, without being either didactic or ill-natured, by the time it dawned upon me that Edith was certainly not coming.

Somewhat late in the afternoon, however, Aunt Marion arrived in a state of excitement which defies description ; and then the course of events began to declare itself with much distinctness.

'Vera, what in the world is all this ?' she exclaimed.

'All what, Aunt Marion ?'

'All what, indeed ? Why, all Wichborough is in an uproar. I was in the town this morning, and got a hint, and I went after luncheon to find out what was going on. I never felt so disgraced in my life. Everyone has a different version of the story. I could never have believed it. And just when I was beginning to hope your wretched bringing up had done less mischief than one would have thought possible. I always foresaw it. But I never could have believed you capable of such a thing. Just when you seem to have grown so much quieter, too. I feel quite bewildered. What on earth does it all mean ?'

I do not think I even changed colour, so rapidly was my education in the art of maintaining a perfectly impassive exterior progressing. 'Until you tell me what you have heard, Aunt Marion,' I said, 'it is quite impossible for me to explain what it means.'

'Oh, I am sure you know, quite well. The whole place is ringing with it. Though everyone tells it differently, and some say you are, and some say Mrs. Mason is most to blame. I never approved of your intimacy with her, a most undesirable acquaintance. But how could you be guilty of such folly, such

impropriety, as to allow her to persuade you to an interview with Major Fordham at night, in the debatable land. I never heard of such a disgraceful proceeding, and so low, too. Just like a low class servant.'

'Edith never made the most remote approach to any such proposition,' I replied.

'Then do you mean to deny that you met Major Fordham in the debatable land last night, and talked to him for some time?'

'I mean to deny nothing of the kind. I did meet and talk to Major Fordham, but no one could have been more amazed than I was at his appearance there.'

'And what business had you to remain a moment, if it was really so? It looks very doubtful, Vera.'

'I stayed because I judged it important that I should hear what he had to say.'

'And what was that?'

'You can ask him that question, Aunt Marion. I do not feel myself at liberty to repeat what he said.'

'Meet a man in that way, and refuse to reveal what passed?' almost screamed Aunt Marion, who was evidently charged almost to the bursting point with curiosity. 'I never heard anything so disgraceful. You are worse than I thought you. I am sure it is a mercy you have fallen into the hands of such an honourable upright man as Major Fordham or the consequences might have been dreadful. But I must insist on your telling what passed. How can we otherwise decide what must be done?'

'Insist away, then,' I replied, rather impertinently. I was thoroughly annoyed at the turn affairs had taken, and was getting cross.

'Do not be insolent, Vera, I can hardly suppose Major Fordham would propose to you. But if there is anything of that sort in view, I must act for you. You are not a girl many men would care to marry. It would be a most extraordinary piece of good fortune if such a man as Major Fordham took a fancy to you.'

'Tell Lord Wichborough that,' I replied.

'I do not consider Lord Wichborough a very good judge. I can quite trust to my own judgment. But how does the case really stand ?'

'There is no case to stand at all, that I know of. That I had a conversation with Major Fordham last night, in the debatable land I allow ; but it was wholly accidental, and I do not consider myself at liberty to repeat what passed.'

'And what had Mrs. Mason to do with it ?'

'Nothing as far as I was concerned.'

'Then why does all Wichborough mix her and Captain Mason up in it ?'

'You had better ask all Wichborough. I am not in its confidence.'

'You are very impertinent, Vera. I believe you have not the least regard for your character. But it is quite clear you must go away for a time, to let all this scandal drop. It is quite dreadful the things that are being said. I must go and talk to your father about it.'

That fairly roused me. 'Aunt Marion,' I said, 'if you dare to say a single word about the matter to my father, I will get a written order from Dr. Brydges that you are never to be allowed to set foot within the Deanery doors. Under no circumstances could you see him to-day. He did not sleep well, and is not very comfortable. But I will not have him worried about this nonsense.'

'Nonsense ? and all Wichborough talking. It is absolutely necessary you should go away.'

'I will not go away, and Wichborough may talk until it exhausts its capacity for lying and slandering, which will not be in my lifetime. What on earth does it matter to me ?'

'Not a soul will speak to you, I believe.'

'Then I shall be relieved from an infinite amount of boredom.'

Aunt Marion looked at me for a moment. Then, with all solemnity, she hurled her final shaft. Well, Vera, I never could hope you would turn out what one could wish, but I never

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expected this. It is a mercy I have no young daughters or I must really have taken into consideration whether I could have allowed you to come to the Court. I can only say, if Major Fordham had any idea of marrying you, he has had a most lucky escape.'

'I think he has,' I replied, sententiously. And Aunt Marion went her way.

But why had not Edith come? With all this gossip afloat she must have seen the advisability of some conference between us. I really began to feel a little uneasy about her, remembering that she was wholly unaware of what Major Fordham had said to her husband. Had some blundering on her part precipitated a catastrophe? Had the means, whatever they might be, by which this scandal had got noised abroad, involved some disastrous discovery for her? I felt more anxious to see her than I had ever done in my life before.

The following morning passed, and still she did not come. But in the afternoon my anxiety was changed into dismay and perplexity. A message was brought to me that Captain Mason was in the drawingroom, and wanted to see me.

This was appalling! I felt myself called on to face an antagonist without even an idea with what weapons he would be armed. Had he found out the truth, and come to reproach me? or had he come to try and gain more definite information from me? I could only hastily draw up my mental forces in the best order of battle possible, and trust to my wits for generalship.

Captain Mason was evidently labouring under distressing embarrassment when I entered the drawingroom. Whatever he had come to do, it was clear the task was not a welcome one. His nervousness greatly aided my assumption of perfect composure of manner.

'I hope you will forgive my intrusion, Miss Dormer,' he said. 'I—I—in fact I felt I must see you. After the painful occurrences of the evening before last'—

I took him up short. He was not a favourite of mine at any

time. 'I was not aware,' I answered coldly, 'that anything painful had happened to you.'

'Oh, of course, I have no right interfere. I did not intend—I—I was much annoyed at my unfortunate intrusion.'

'It was certainly a most unjustifiable one.'

'No, Miss Dormer,' he answered, with some spirit. 'There you are under a mistake, a very natural one, certainly, still none the less a mistake. Some very unpleasant rumours had reached my ears, which caused, and fully justified, my action. The result has been a great relief to me. Still it has brought to my knowledge much that is painful to me.'

'I am really at a loss, Captain Mason,' I said, 'to understand to what all this is to lead? You can hardly suppose I intend to discuss my private affairs with you.'

'Certainly not. Nothing is further from my intention. But unfortunately my wife is mixed up in this business.'

'In what way?' I asked, cautiously feeling my way among the pitfalls.

'In a way that forces me to blame her much, as it has led to rumours most detrimental to her. But she is always too impulsive to be prudent. When I questioned her regarding what I had heard, she admitted a good deal which annoyed me very much. She allowed that she had arranged this interview.'

'The little viper!' I had almost said it audibly, in my indignation. 'Will you tell me,' I said, 'exactly what, as far as I am personally concerned, Mrs. Mason has told you?'

'Well, she admitted, very unwillingly I allow, my wife has tried loyally to stand by you, Miss Dormer, that she herself unlocked the door to allow Major Fordham to enter the debatable land. When I pressed her further she allowed that this was not the first time she had thus enabled him to enter the Deanery grounds, though she did not know how often you may have met. The truth is, there has been some spying going on. Hence the springing up of rumours most derogatory to my wife's character. Major Fordham's and my own entrance and exit the other night were observed. Of course in order to clear herself to me, Edith

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was forced to admit the truth. Her folly was unpardonable. I cannot think she acted a friendly part to yourself, in aiding these clandestine interviews, but I have no right to interfere on that point. What I blame severely is my wife's folly in running the risk of bringing such imputations as she has done on herself.'

I felt that I had grown white with anger. I do not think, in all my life, I ever had to struggle so hard to keep back the truth. 'Mrs. Mason appears to have been tolerably definite in her statements,' was all I said.

'She was forced to be. The whole business was most painful and distressing to me, and I know she bitterly regrets what she has done. Edith was in no haste to speak, but you could not expect but that she should confess the whole truth, in order to clear her character as a wife. You may rest assured the facts will never pass beyond ourselves.'

'Why did Mrs. Mason not come and tell me this herself?' I asked, with a grim smile at the idea. What induced her to make you her representative?'

Captain Mason began to smooth his hat with much energy and persistency, from which fact I drew the natural inference that the most important part of his communication was yet to come.

'Well, I cannot say that I am exactly Edith's representative,' he said. 'In fact, but for me, she would have been here herself, ere now.'

'You prevented her coming?'

'I did. I am deeply grieved, Miss Dormer, most deeply pained at having to do what I none the less conceive it my duty to do. I can never forget that you saved my wife's life. Still, she is so excitable and impulsive. Were she older it would not so much matter. I have been speaking to her mother and find her quite of my opinion. Of course we know that the manner in which you have been brought up has led—led—to your looking at things in a different light from the ordinary one. Mrs. Cranley has always felt anxious, and considering all that has happened, I have really felt myself obliged to beg that Edith

would relinquish the acquaintance. Mrs. Cranley quite agrees with my view of the matter.'

Poor Captain Mason! I am sure he believed he had acquitted himself of an awkward and unpleasant task in the most judicious and praiseworthy manner. But the grim irony of the situation was too much for me, when it fairly dawned upon me that I was destined to play the part of wicked wolf to Edith Mason's innocent lamb. I had been so carefully choosing the language in which I would give her to understand my opinions and determination, that I might avoid either being dictatorial, or seeming to administer kicks; and lo! it was I who was to be lectured as mildly, and kicked as gently as the necessary protection of the innocent would admit! I gave vent suddenly to a hearty laugh. Captain Mason looked at me in blank amazement.

'What does Mrs. Mason say to that arrangement?' I asked.

'Edith is much distressed, I can assure you. She strove most earnestly to shake my resolution, but I felt I had no option. I must, of course, think first of my wife. I trust the lesson she has had may be of much service to her in time to come. I hope when you are both older, and perhaps differently circumstanced, that the acquaintance may be renewed. Edith sent you her love, and begged me to tell you how very, very sorry she is for what has happened. You will send her some kind message, will you not?'

'No, Captain Mason,' I calmly replied. 'I will not do anything of the sort.'

'I am very sorry. Edith will feel it very much, I know.'

He rose as he spoke, evidently not sorry to end an unpleasant interview. Then my suppressed indignation found vent in, I think, the bitterest sarcasm I ever perpetrated.

'I suppose,' I said, as he shook hands with me, 'that should I ever be on the spot again when Mrs. Mason's horse runs away with her, I shall not incur your displeasure if I take the liberty of stopping it.'

I repented the words as soon as they were spoken. The sarcasm was as mean and undignified as it was bitter. More-

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over, as regarded Captain Mason it was unjust. He was not an impartial observer, who should have no difficulty in judging of probabilities in the case. A man could not be an unbiassed judge between two women when one was his own wife. He could not be expected but to believe and act on what he had heard. But I was in no humour to be either just or generous.

Captain Mason grew perfectly scarlet. 'That is a cruel cut, Miss Dormer,' he said. 'I will not attempt any reply. Good afternoon.'

In another moment I was alone. From the tenor of my last remark it will be clear that I was no long-suffering angel of gentleness. I do not think I was ever the prey of such a throng of conflicting feelings. Edith's treacherous meanness had roused in me an utter contempt for her which seemed to revolutionize all my sentiments. In the white heat of my indignation I denounced her to myself as a treacherous little coward, and repented of ever having compromised myself in order to shield her. How often, I wonder, has a quick perception of the ludicrous hindered the perpetration of a mean action? I really believe, so evil a counsellor is an angry spirit, that but for my keen sense of the absurdity of the whole results of Edith's follies falling on my innocent head, I might have been capable of writing, even then, and enlightening Captain Mason. But the absurdity was too patent. The vain little fool, who had carried levity to the very edge of wrong-doing, was to get off with mild censure for a little good-natured indiscretion, whilst I, who had never in my life committed myself to any folly of that sort, was to bear the stigma due to her discreditable doings.

Even in solitude I laughed as I thought of it, and the laughter cleared my mental and moral vision. After all, what could the girl be expected to do? I had voluntarily stepped into the mire to aid her. She had only pushed me in a little further, in order to land herself on firm ground. Could anything else be expected of her? A vain, frivolous, selfish girl, to whom that position in society, which might possibly be endangered, was the

very breath of her life. And after all, the mire was of much less consequence to me than to her. She had been nurtured upon artificial systems and hollow conventions: was she to be expected to ring true now, when a really severe strain was put upon her? No. Let it pass. Let her flutter her butterfly wings in the sunshine. I was strong enough to stand steady under the storm. Then the words, 'another leaf in your laurel crown,' came suddenly back to me, and a great wave of softness and sadness surged over me, sweeping away, for the moment, all the hot anger and cynical bitterness which had been struggling together within me.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SHADOWS DEEPEN.

MY anger flamed up fiercely again the next day, all the same, for the post brought me a letter from Edith, full of hysterical lamentations and entreaties for pardon, founded on paltry excuses and mean subterfuges. My cynicism waxed as I read, and prepared the way for the burst of wrath brought about by the conclusion, in which she urged that, after all, the whole thing might be put right, if I would only consent to marry Major Fordham, who was madly in love with me, she believed, and had never really cared for her: I am not sure that she did not reach the climax of urging the step upon me as a more thorough and complete rehabilitation of herself than could by any other means be accomplished; but my patience failed me ere I had finished the letter, and in hot anger I sealed it up in a fresh envelope, and returned it to her without comment.

From Major Fordham, also, I received a letter, telling me of his deep indignation at Mrs. Mason's cowardly conduct. 'Of course I can do nothing,' he said, 'where a woman is in question. But I have told her my opinion in no measured terms; a fact I only tell you because I know it will be an additional source of

satisfaction to you to know that all acquaintance between her and me is at an end.' He gallantly did the utmost he could for me, but his line of action having been adopted without any thought of the imputation of prior meetings, he only managed to increase my condemnation. Wichborough, lay and clerical, at least the feminine part thereof, naturally saw in his action evidence of very honourable conduct on his part, tending to show that though he might be somewhat dissipated, he was at heart an upright, conscientious man. But if I did not mean to accept him, how much more discreditable to me were these clandestine meetings which I had allowed.

'I always feel,' said Mrs. Cranley, in a conversation which was repeated to me, 'that we must not be too severe on poor Vera. All allowance should be made for her unfortunate bringing up. Still, there was nothing in that bringing up necessarily producing such an utter want of self-respect. There must be something radically wrong. I am very glad of my son-in-law's decision. Edith is much too easily led to be safe in such association. But I could never have believed Vera could be so vindictive. Edith wrote her, she told me, as affectionate a letter as she could, and Vera returned it without a single word of comment. That I think shows a thoroughly bad nature. The poor, dear Dean! his illness has really been a blessing in disguise. I imagine he knows nothing. I believe it would have killed him.'

Aunt Marion, like the unhappy Constance in *Marmion*, continued to—

'Threaten by turns, beseech, upbraid,'

just as her weathercock mood swung round from point to point of the compass, according to the direction of the last squall of scandal that swept over her. Poor woman, the anxieties and perplexities of the last few years had certainly told heavily upon both her nerves and temper, and I think she found a positive relief in turning her attention to some terrible worry not connected in any way with Colonel L'Estrange, to say nothing of the pleasure of figuring as a successful prophet. She emerged,

therefore, from her aristocratic seclusion, and mixed more than she had ever before done in Wichborough society, learning, in consequence, a good deal more than she had ever before known of the nature and extent of the gossip of a cathedral and garrison town. Hence I heard more of what was being said than I should have otherwise done, seeing that the feminine element in Close and town avoided me, and the masculine element avoided the subject. The latter had, I strongly suspect, shrewdly surmised something not very far from the truth, or had possibly made observations as well as Lord Wichborough and my cousin. Certainly there was in its attitude towards me an assumption of a grave, almost tender deference, such as we naturally manifest towards anyone bearing with fortitude some heavy burden of such a nature that we dare not express the sympathy that we feel.

But Aunt Marion contrived, one morning, to infuse a drop of untold bitterness into my cup, and at the same time to forge another link in the chain of my destiny. She had been to pay an early visit on some pretence to Mrs. Duncomb, whose house was the fountain head of Close gossip, chiefly through the instrumentality of Miss Duncomb, an elderly young woman of very disagreeable temper, and she found me at the Court on her return to luncheon.

'Well, Vera,' she broke out, as soon as she came in, 'you have found a champion at last.'

'Is it a woman or a man?' I asked.

'A woman.'

'Then heaven help her!' I retorted. I was beginning to grow irritable with Aunt Marion, as regarded this subject at least.

'She seems quite able to help herself,' Aunt Marion replied. 'Miss Duncomb was there. It was a little meeting at Mrs. Mitchell's about the Dorcas Society. She says she flew at them like a wild cat.'

'Which particular *she* thus turned upon the ranks of the elect?'

'Don't be sarcastic, Vera. It is execrable taste. It was Mrs. Warren.'

It was like a sudden stab. 'Mrs. Warren!' I ejaculated.

'Yes, of all people. That vulgar commonplace little woman. Miss Duncomb said she could not have believed she could have got into such a fury. Her eyes perfectly blazed. She told them it was a disgrace to them to spread scandal that way, and that you were quite incapable of any levity of conduct; that it was quiet demure sort of girls that made clandestine appointments with dissipated men, not frank open straightforward girls like you. That she was quite sure you had done nothing you need be the least ashamed of, and if they exasperated you into speaking out, some of them might perhaps be sorry they had not let well alone. They were all quite taken aback. She silenced them all for the time. I hope you are proud of your champion, my dear.'

I could not answer, and Aunt Marion, after rambling on for a time, without my having any very distinct idea what she was saying, left the room. Then I buried my face in my hands, trying hard to keep back the tears which I did not care should leave their traces on my face just then. I did not hear the door open, or perceive that anyone had entered the room, until a hand was laid softly on my head, and starting up I found Conrad beside me.

'Vera,' he said gently, 'do you remember a promise you made me some time since?'

'A promise,' I repeated. 'No, I don't remember.'

'That if you needed help you would come to me. Is it not time for the fulfilment of that promise, dear?'

It was the first time Conrad had broached the subject. I had felt convinced he did not blame me, but he had said nothing.

'No,' I said. 'I want no help.'

'I do not suppose you want it. You are such a determined little gipsy, but are you sure you do not need it? You have done a noble deed, but one which exposes you to graver risks

than the chatter of a set of silly women. You must not let your independence carry you too far.'

'How do you know what I have done?'

'Partly through knowing what you have not done; partly through some observations of my own. Do you think I do not know how impossible it would be for you to commit yourself to any such indiscretion as you are credited with? And do you think I had not some reason for a warning I gave you? I can very easily divine pretty nearly what happened, and I have been silent only because I would not thwart your generous purpose. But I am a little afraid about Major Fordham. He is not a man to be trusted. You must be cautious, Vera. Remember, you are beyond the sphere of a girl's knowledge there.'

'Oh, no, Conrad,' I said, 'you are unjust, there, to Major Fordham. I do not, I never could like him, but he has acted most honourably to me. The only annoyance I feel with him is that he has forced me to feel myself under an obligation to him.'

'I am glad of that. You are just the girl to rouse into action whatever latent good may linger in a bad man's nature, but do not, therefore, begin to think Major Fordham is a good man. Stand on your guard, and come to me directly if you see any cause for alarm. Now that your father cannot aid you, I am your proper guardian.'

'I am not sure but that position will be disputed,' I said.

'By Lord Wichborough?'

'Yes. Oh Conrad, I dread their return to Buckton. He will be awfully angry with me. I am quite afraid what he may take it into his head to do.'

I was tacitly accepting the fact of Conrad's discernment of the true position of affairs, and knew that he would understand the exact nature of my dread; that Lord Wichborough would be equally clear-sighted, and that the dire wrath aroused by his strong affection for me would lead him to insist mercilessly on the true facts of the case being brought out, regardless on whom discredit fell, so long as I was cleared. And I had a very strong suspicion that the interference of a man in Lord Wich-

borough's position was all that would be needed to make Major Fordham turn Queen's evidence. I do not think he was the man voluntarily to betray a woman. But when it came to a choice between Edith and me, the bitterness of his feelings about her suggested that it probably would not take much to turn the scale.

Conrad thought for a little. 'When are they expected at Buckton?' he asked at length.

'In about a fortnight, I believe.'

'Very well, dear. I will write to Wichborough, and see him as soon as he returns. Is that all I can do for you?'

'Yes all, thank you. You are very good to me, Conrad.'

'Is not loyal aid the fitting meed of those who loyally aid others?' he asked with a smile. 'Does it ever occur to you, Vera, to remember that you are not yet of age, and to reflect how many people already have cause to be grateful to you for valuable services.'

'No,' I replied.

'No. Because it has become a second nature to you to live for others, not for yourself. And sometimes, dear child, I misdoubt me, you will follow that course until you make total shipwreck of yourself. You have got among the breakers already. We must try and keep you off the rocks, if we can.'

'I am not half so good as you make me out, Conrad,' I exclaimed vehemently. I was not in the mood to swallow commendation at the moment. Mrs. Warren seemed to be close to me, in the guise of an accusing spirit.

'No, dear,' he said, with a smile, 'you are only spontaneous, and subject to sudden impulses. But then those impulses seem always to have a tendency to explode in one direction. Now come away to luncheon.'

Conrad had lifted off me a great weight of anxiety. From the first I had had the dread upon me of Lord Wichborough; dread alike of his believing or disbelieving my culpability. In the one case I knew he would be deeply distressed, in the other I feared the results of his action, which, where I was concerned, would

be prompt and thorough. Now that I found Conrad seemed to have so clear a perception of the position, I began to suspect that he and Lord Wichborough had previously known more than, being men, they had chosen to reveal. How much they might choose to blame me for what I had done I cared very little, so long as they did not suspect me of what I had not done, and did not thwart my purpose. Conrad was clearly minded not to do that, and I thought he would have weight enough to prevent Lord Wichborough from taking any steps in that direction. I was satisfied *then* that I rejoiced in feeling I was carrying out Mr Charlote's lessons in willing self-sacrifice, and broad comprehensive charity; I am convinced *now* that those words about a laurel crown were echoing through every corner of my memory, and that the secret source of all my courage, confidence, and inward joy was the conviction that Adrian Warren understood and approved, and that I was showing myself worthy of his love. If only his wife had not stood up so loyally for me! That was a wound which I knew would never cease to bleed at times.

I did not see Lord Wichborough until the first meet of the hounds after his return to Buckton, and that was also the first occasion since the great scandal on which I made my appearance in Wichborough. I had not purposely avoided the town, but I went out very little. I had learned almost to forestall my father's wishes, and I fancied he felt his helplessness more when I was not beside him, to find him the books or other things he wanted. He had, however, seen the meet announcement in the paper, and insisted on my going.

'I will not have you give up all your open-air exercise, my child,' he said. 'God knows how long I may be a burden on you. I can get on very well for a day, and the confinement will soon tell upon a gipsy like you.'

Accordingly I set out, and the meet being in the direction of Ratchford, I had to ride through the town. Then I saw what was in store for me. It was a fine morning, and a number of people were about, Mrs. Stevens became suddenly absorbed

in some disarrangement of her dress when she saw me coming. Mrs. and Miss Duncomb, coming out of one of the principal shops, turned hastily back as I approached, and from one or two other people on whom I chanced too unexpectedly to let them avoid a meeting, I received very grave, stiff salutations. I might be the Dean's daughter, but I was unquestionably a pariah. I think if I had been on foot I should have felt a little crushed, but it was not in nature, at least in my nature, to feel so when looking down upon every one from the back of a matchless hunter, which almost every man I passed turned to gaze at with longing eyes. The mere movement of such a horse under me aroused a sort of feeling of elation.

I fully expected Lord Wichborough would arrive from quite a different direction, and the sound of horse's hoofs approaching from behind, suggesting the possibility that it might be Major Fordham, made me carefully avoid looking round, so it was not until Lord Wichborough was close beside me I had any suspicion he was near.

'You little scapegrace,' he said, as he drew his horse up close beside me. Then, as he caught sight of my face, his tone altered. 'My poor child, this has told upon you.'

'Far less than my father's illness has done,' I answered.

'Yes, that is terribly sad. But altogether you have had a sharp discipline. L'Estrange says I am to ask no questions. I don't think I need to do that. One thing I know. If that woman gets in my way I shall ride over her, I am certain of that. I cannot approve, Vera. You are too Quixotic. There is reason in all things.'

I shook my head. 'Let it pass,' I said. 'I do not want to discuss it. It was a mere episode, and it is over. My father has not been distressed, and neither you nor Conrad believe I have been to blame. I care little about the rest.'

'No, it does not much matter to you. And as that charmingly, prudent, discreet matron, Mrs. Mason, is to be protected in future from the contamination of your levity and giddiness, some good has followed in the course of all the mischief. If your



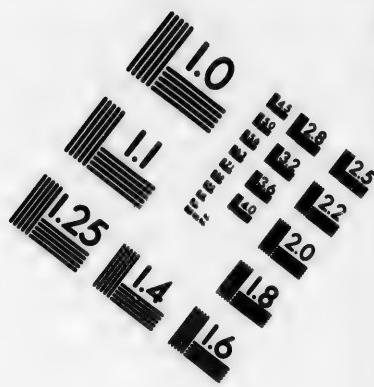
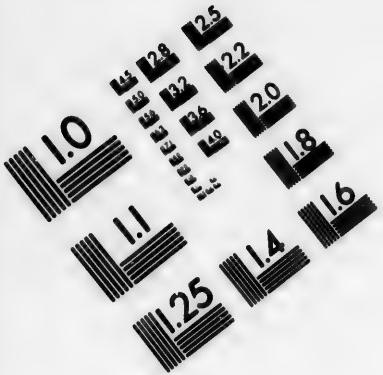
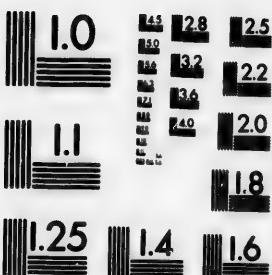
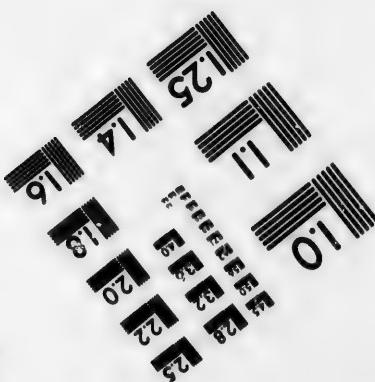
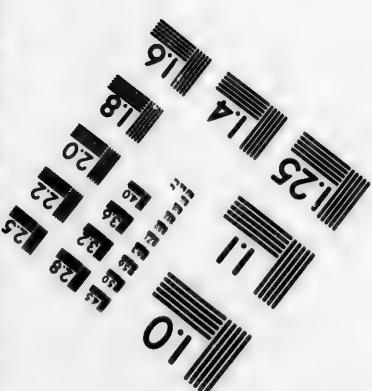


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cousin had believed it I would not have consented to let it rest. But he, it seems, had been not less observant than myself. He is perfectly satisfied.'

'Surely that is reversing the order of things,' I said. 'It would be more my cousin's place to satisfy you, than yours to satisfy him.'

Lord Wichborough looked at me with a quiet smile. 'Circumstances alter cases,' he said.

There was evidently some undercurrent of meaning in his words, and for a moment I felt puzzled. Then a suspicion of what was in his mind flashed across me. He suspected Conrad of being the safeguard of whom he had spoken. My first impulse was to undeceive him, but then I paused. It was better so perhaps. The delusion was a harmless one, for both Conrad and me. Dispel it, and observation might only be set free to turn its attention in more dangerous directions.

'There is one thing, Vera,' Lord Wichborough continued, after a few moments, 'which you must tell me. Major Fordham has been speaking of you everywhere in the highest terms, and letting it be generally known that you refused him—an admission I don't suppose he ever made in his life before. The one thing he piques himself on is his irresistibility. But did he really propose to you? I have a good reason for asking.'

'No. He only gave me distinctly to understand that he would gladly have done so had he dared. But he said it would be an insult to me.'

'Ah. Then Fordham has really acted admirably, though I believe he has made all the women in Wichborough more furious against you than they would otherwise have been. He has pretty well turned all their heads, and they are half mad with jealousy. Now, however, I have no objection to tell you why I asked. Major Fordham is a married man. Had he really proposed to you it could not have been allowed to pass.'

'Major Fordham married!' I gasped.

'Yes. I had heard some rumours of the story before he ever came here. That was what made me uneasy when I met him

at the Deanery. I did not know anything for certain, and even were it as I thought I did not believe him an unlikely man to try and contract a second marriage, if he thought he could safely do so. I have been making inquiries since, and heard the whole story. He was once done by a woman. He cannot be expected to acknowledge her, but his acquaintance with her character previously, and the tenor of his own life, prevent him getting free. In that case he really merits commiseration, and I am very glad to find there is no need for me to spread the story. But you look quite scared, child.'

'I am not scared,' I said. 'But oh, so thankful!'

'That you were safeguarded?'

'If you like.'

'That was another circumstance I took into account. But I have felt very anxious and uneasy.'

My sentiments were very different from any Lord Wichborough supposed. If any feeling of regret had lingered in my mind that I had interposed between the hapless Edith and the peril she had so madly risked, it was gone for ever now. Major Fordham had said he had intended to try and induce her to elope. Her husband's unexpected appearance would probably have precipitated that catastrophe, and she, poor silly butterfly, would have found herself hopelessly at the mercy of a man who could never make her his wife, even had he wished to do so. A vision of her as the pretty fair haired little girl she had been in bye-gone years, when we had played together as children, rose up before me, and the price I had paid for my intervention seemed to dwindle into a mere speck, measured against the exceedingly greatness of the reward I had won.

My spirits rose to an extent which Swallow seemed thoroughly to appreciate. I do not think I had felt so light-hearted since the never-to-be-forgotten day of the great discovery of my life. The run was a splendid, but very stiff one, and the finish was at a place about a mile from the Manor, near the road to Buckton. Our horses were all pretty well done, even Swallow showed signs of fatigue. 'The direction of the run had been evident from the

first, and Lord Wichborough's groom had shrewdly gone off at once with his spare horse, and trotted round through Wichborough. He joined the dwindled remnant of the hunt just as Stapleton had dismounted to cut off the brush.

I saw the man speaking rather earnestly to Lord Wichborough, who was standing beside his fairly spent horse. Then Lord Wichborough beckoned to Adrian Warren, who was also on the ground, at a short distance, and a brief colloquy followed; after which Mr. Warren, mounting the groom's horse, trotted away in the direction of the Manor. Lord Wichborough mounted his fresh horse, and came leisurely towards me.

'Come, Vera,' he said, 'you have taken it out of Swallow to-day. Let us ride quietly towards the Manor.'

Something in his tone caused me a vague sense of uneasiness; but he said nothing till we were fairly out on the road. Then he said—

'We must trot on to the Manor, dear child. There is bad news. The groom brought word. The Dean has had a serious attack since you went out. Warren is gone to get the pony carriage ready. His pony is a very fast trotter, and will get you home sooner than Swallow could do.'

'You are not deceiving me,' I said. 'He is not dead?'

'No, dear, no. Dr. Brydges spoke to the groom himself. He told him to tell me the danger was not instant, but he did not think it likely your father would live for forty-eight hours. He is quite sensible, and begged you might not be alarmed. I thought it better to tell you at once.'

Adrian Warren was standing by the pony carriage on the road, when we reached the Manor. He did not say a single word. He did not even let me catch his eye. He came forward, lifted me from the saddle, and wrapping a fur cloak round me, placed me in the carriage, and took his seat beside me. Lord Wichborough, also, was far too wise to hazard words of sympathy. 'I shall be at the Deanery in the evening,' was all he said, as Mr. Warren took up the reins, and in another moment we were whirling along the road at a tremendous pace.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LAST OF THE DEANERY.

NO word was spoken between us until just as we reached the Deanery. Then a sudden dread came over me, and I exclaimed—

'Oh, Mr. Warren, do you think Aunt Marion is there?'

'No, I am sure she is not. Dr. Brydges told the groom to say she had been to the Deanery, but was so excited he had refused to allow her to see the Dean. That at least is spared you.'

Waters was standing at the Deanery door. 'He is quite comfortable, my dear,' she said, 'and so anxious you should not be alarmed.'

With only a silent pressure of the hand, as I got out of the carriage, Adrian Warren turned and drove away. In another moment I was by my father's side. He smiled his sweet, calm smile upon me.

'I hope they did not frighten you very much, my child,' he said. 'Was the run a good one?'

'Very,' I answered. There was a sort of dignified composure about him which seemed to force me to be calm. 'The groom arrived just as it was over.'

'I am glad the day was not spoiled for you. I fear it will be the last run you will have for some time. Go and change your habit, and then come and sit with me.'

I silently obeyed, in a sort of dumb bewilderment, mechanically swallowing the refreshment Waters brought me, while I hastily changed my dress. And then, through the rapidly fleeting hours of his life, I sat by my father's side. He was very quiet, and quite free from pain; but he did not speak much, sometimes I thought he dozed.

In the evening Dr. Brydges came again. He told me strength was slowly failing, but that it was quite impossible to say exactly how long it would be before the end came. Then came an incoherent scrawl from Aunt Marion. She was quite ill—the

shock had been frightful—her only near relative in the world. If she could be of any use she would come, but really her nerves were so shaken that otherwise she thought she had better spare herself the strain, etc. The exquisite sensitiveness of the feelings of selfish people is really a boon, at times. I hastily scrawled an answer, heartily agreeing in the advisability of her sparing herself any useless strain, and promising she should hear the first thing in the morning.

Then they came to tell me Lord Wichborough was in the drawingroom. I think my father had been watching for him. He asked directly if he had come, and seemed quite to rouse himself when I told him he was downstairs.

'I want to see him,' he said. 'You will leave us for a little, my child. I shall not keep him long.'

I went down to the drawing-room, and found both Lord Wichborough and Adrian Warren there.

'I am not going to stay,' Adrian said, as Lord Wichborough left the room. 'I came with Lord Wichborough, to hear the latest report. I am going to walk home.'

I did not dare to ask him to stay. With the life slowly ebbing away, all I had in the world seemed to be slipping from me, and a blank, dreary future, in which there was nothing I could call my own, to be looming, a cheerless solitude, before me. The temptation to shape into words my voiceless cry to him for sympathy and support might prove too strong for me. I only rose and held out my hand.

He held it for a moment, and then our eyes met. He was very pale. I think the struggle was harder even for him than for me. I had only to nerve myself to bear. He had to nerve himself to leave me to bear alone.

'It is hard to be forced to be silent,' he said, in a slightly tremulous voice, 'but it must be so. Stand steady, dear. Your strength and firmness have saved an erring soul from destruction. They will carry you safely through your own dark hour.'

His firm, strong clasp tightened on my hand for a moment,

and then he was gone, leaving me stronger, steadier, more determined that come what might, I would never flinch.

I was soon summoned to my father's room again, and the stillness of night settled down on that silent watch. Only the deep rich tones of the Cathedral clock proclaimed, at measured intervals, that another quarter of an hour of the fleeting life of him who for five and twenty years had lived as Dean beneath the shadow of the grand old pile, had passed away.

I thought my father was dozing, but suddenly heard him say in a clear, distinct tone—

'Vera.'

I came and knelt beside the low couch on which, since his illness, he had always slept, and he laid the one hand he could use on my head.

'A father's blessing on you, my child,' he said. 'You have been the best of daughters to me. People thought it was indolence guided your bringing up. There was too much of that; but it was not altogether so, and the end has justified my action in not allowing your freedom-loving nature to be trammelled by artificial systems, and conventional laws. My wild little gipsy has grown up wonderfully free from the weaknesses which are apt to make shipwreck of women's lives. I have given full consideration to the fact, Vera, in the arrangements I have made for you. For the short time that remains, until you are legally of age, Lord Wichborough and Conrad will act as your guardians. Then your whole property is at your own disposal. You are perfectly free to do what you please. They will be your best advisers on all matters of business, but I have told Lord Wichborough I wish you, from the first, to be allowed to do just what you please. I know you are fit to be trusted with freedom. Make a better use of your life, my child, than I have done of mine.'

'You, Father! Who could find fault with your life?'

'Myself, Vera. I have known, since first I was struck down, that I was on my death bed. That strangely alters all the aspects of the life that is over. Mine is not a satisfactory one

to look back upon—a life of selfish luxurious ease. My money I have given freely. Thank God there are many whose burdens have been lightened, and whose lives have been made happier by that. But that is but a poor death-bed consolation. I have given of my abundance, of that which cost me nothing. I have made a good use of my money, but a bad one of my life. But we are not units, we are links in a chain. You must make up for my deficiencies. You have the life I have given you, and the property I leave to you. Use both as a solemn trust for the welfare of others, but especially your life. Live, work, and, if it must be, suffer for others, and count the spending thus of your life an immeasurably higher duty than the spending of your money. And never suffer your moral force to be weakened by the atmosphere of refined luxury in which I have lost the energy which might have saved me from such a useless existence. Then you will look back over your life, when you are lying on your death bed, with very different feelings from mine.'

He paused, but I could not speak. I could only kneel silently with the wasted hand resting upon my head. After a moment's silence he spoke again.

'I think your life will be no path of roses, Vera. You are too true, too loving, too ready to sacrifice yourself. There is always tribulation in the world for such, but always a glorious unclouded sunset. Now, sit down beside me, my child, and hold my hand in yours. I feel weary and drowsy. I think I know what that means. I daresay I shall sleep. Perhaps when I awake it will be to behold the King in His beauty.'

And so it was. Through the long hours of the night I sat by his side, the faithful old family servants sharing the long solemn watch, and in the early hours of a soft December morning he passed away, calmly and peacefully, with hardly even a deep-drawn breath.

Standing at my window, as the cold grey dawn stole over the familiar scenes, I strove to realise the change that had come over all the conditions of my life. I was, even now, but a dweller on sufferance in the house in which I was born; and ere

very many more mornings should have dawned on the solemn old Deanery, and its lovely grounds; I should have to be indebted to the courtesy of a new Dean for leave to remain in my old home for so long a space as might be necessary to enable me to arrange for the removal of all that belonged to me, from his house. Even as I stood, the first deep note of the great bell of the Cathedral sent far and wide, over Wichborough and all the surrounding country, the news that another name was added to the long list of those who had been deans of Wichborough, and proclaimed to me that I was a homeless orphan.

But more than with my own position, my thoughts were occupied then with that last brief conversation with my father. It had shown me, more clearly than I had ever seen it before, the true character which underlay the superficial crust deposited by circumstances. Throughout all his illness I had observed a growing tenderness in his manner to me, telling of an affection far deeper than I had ever known he felt towards me; and now it seemed clear to me that the placid imperturbable mother, by whose side my father would soon be laid, had been a more potent power for evil than anyone could have supposed. That my father, sensitive and loving by nature, but not of a very energetic temperament, had found in the retirement of his well-stocked library, and the gratification of his scholarly tastes, a refuge from the repellent atmosphere of her not unamiable, but cold, unsympathetic nature, and had thus gradually drifted into those habits of luxurious self-indulgence which had caused him so strongly to condemn a life which, in the eyes of the world, had been a singularly blameless one. But was not life continuous? Had not energy but lain dormant for a time in him, to spring up with greater force in me, so that the life derived from him might yet bear fruit to his honour and praise! So I read his parting injunctions, and the meaning of his gift of absolute freedom to do what I pleased, untrammelled by conventional rules. And I had no indistinct perception of what the first act of self-sacrifice, in obedience to his admonitions, would involve for me.

From these solemn, not altogether sad musings, I was called back with startling suddenness to every day life, and all the irritating realities with which habitual selfishness can load it, by strange sounds from the hall. I foreboded what that portended, and went hastily down stairs, to find Aunt Marion in a condition happily compounded of rage and hysterics. Instant notice of my father's death had been sent to the Court, but Baxter, unluckily forgetful of the Cathedral bell, had resolved not to disturb her mistress until her usual hour for rising. Consequently the tolling of the bell had been her first notice that my father was dead, and her sense of a personal slight had added an appalling amount of violence to her manifestations of grief and despair. She fell upon me the moment I appeared.

'You are the most heartless girl I ever knew, Vera, but you never had any feeling. To expose me to such a dreadful shock in my weak state. What is the loss to you, compared to what it is to me? You are young, with all your life before you. But you might have thought of me, with no one left save my darling brother; and paralysis so apt to be a family complaint. I am sure the least symptom of illness I feel now makes me shudder, and all violent shocks ought to be carefully avoided. But, of course, you never thought of me. And my darling Herbert gone without a word to me! It is perfectly heartless of you.'

Then she went off again in violent hysterics. I felt as hard as a millstone. 'You had better come into the drawingroom, Aunt Marion,' I said. 'All sorts of people will be coming directly, and you will have all Wichborough chattering.'

'All Wichborough is more likely to chatter about your unfeeling coldness,' she sobbed.

'No, for at least it does not make a noise. Come away to the drawingroom.'

There she poured forth such an incoherent torrent as I could not have believed any human being capable of. Her grief; the funeral; mourning; my future destiny; were all mingled up together in bewildering entanglement; with an unhesitating assumption, which fortunately had no terror for me, that my

father would certainly have left her my sole guardian. How long I could have borne it I know not, but in a short time Conrad came to the rescue, terribly distressed physically, poor fellow, by the efforts he had made to hurry after her, in the dull, close weather which was always particularly trying to him.

'I am so grieved, dear child,' he panted. 'I did not know she had set out.' Then he turned to her, and in more peremptory tones than I had ever heard him use to his mother, insisted that she should go back to the Court.

'I shall do nothing of the kind, Conrad,' she replied. 'Vera is under age. Of course your dear uncle will have left everything under my charge, his only near relative. I must arrange everything.'

'You are quite mistaken, mother. I saw Lord Wichborough last night. He and I are Vera's sole guardians. I have sent off a message to him, to meet me here at ten o'clock.'

Then a tornado of injured dignity laid in the dust for the time all Aunt Marion's griefs and fears. With the air of a tragedy queen she renounced us all, and swept out of the house, leaving Conrad and me alone together. Conrad had suffered so much from the hasty walk in the raw, early morning, that I would not let him go back to the Court, and had quite enough to occupy me in seeking to afford him such relief as might fit him for the discussion of business when Lord Wichborough came.

His arrival was in company with his servant and portmanteau.

'I told Cumming to tell them to get a room ready for me, dear child,' he said, as he greeted me. 'You must not be left in the house all alone.'

Those would certainly have been terrible days but for his presence—that dreadful pause of mere passive existence, when the strain, anxiety, and labour of the sick room are a thing of the past, and the every day occupations of life not yet taken up again. For me it was all the worse because I had no single individual in all the world to think for save myself.

Wichborough left cards and kind inquiries in far greater numbers than I in the least expected. 'Am I to be forgiven,

and reinstated, because I am held to be down, now?' I asked Lord Wichborough.

'Humph! If you knew a little more of the world, Vera, that would be the last thought to occur to you. You are mistress now of your father's ample fortune. How are all the Dorcas Societies, and Lord knows what, to be kept going, if the Dean's open purse strings are suddenly drawn?'

My father's will, when it came to be read, was very explicit—a priceless testimony, to me, of his love and confidence. Everything he possessed was mine, without reservation or condition. His wishes respecting pensions to servants, and a few small legacies, were not even mentioned in it, only recorded in some memoranda addressed to me. Lord Wichborough and Conrad were merely to take all the steps necessary to settle everything during the few months which would elapse before I came of age; but were to leave me absolutely free to act as I chose.

The poignancy of Aunt Marion's anguish by no means prevented her from giving audience to all her acquaintance, of both the Close and county, the moment the funeral was over, to discuss this last incredible instance of my father's extraordinary perversity. Then she came fully charged to the Deanery.

'It is perfectly inconceivable, Vera. I really thought Mr. Hodgkinson had gone suddenly off his head when I heard the will read, and I can hardly get any one to believe it is true. Lady Alicia drove in from the Palace the moment she heard it to ask me if it could possibly be a fact? No one could credit your poor dear father could really have carried his infatuation to such a point. It might perhaps have been better after all if he had known the consequences which have already sprung from it. Mrs. Cranley'—

Here I interposed. 'Once for all, Aunt Marion,' I said, 'please to understand that I will neither discuss my father's actions, nor allow any such discussion in my presence.'

'Oh, indeed. I am not to be allowed to speak of my own brother in my niece's presence. This is the first fruits of independence, I suppose. Shall I be deemed impertinent if I

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venture to ask what you intend to do? My son, by whom I have been so strangely superseded, tells me your fortune is even larger than was expected. Are you going to take a house in London, and a shooting-box in Leicestershire, and make your entrance into the world as an eligible heiress of unconventional customs?

'I have been explaining my wishes this morning to Lord Wichborough and Conrad, and both are of opinion they justify my father's confidence. I want you to give me a home at Wichborough Court, Aunt Marion.'

I saw she was greatly taken aback, but she was not going to give in all at once. I felt some compassion for her. I could picture very vividly the mortification which had been inflicted on her fussy sense of self-importance.

'Well really, Vera, that requires some consideration. The wish is creditable to you, but how am I to know that it is anything more than a passing whim? It is a serious thing to have you in the house, and so entirely your own mistress. The world will of course, to some extent, hold me responsible for what you do.'

'I fancy the world will have something to say if you refuse a home to your brother's only child, and force her to find one as best she may. Don't be foolish, Aunt Marion. You know, as well as I do, that it is the only fitting arrangement, and that it will enable me to help you with Colonel L'Estrange far more thoroughly than I have ever been able to do.'

'There is something in that. However, I must think it over. I will talk to Conrad. Of course there is no other place near here suitable for you; and it would certainly be an advantage that you should not be very far away.'

I knew very well how it would end. If I had suggested any course she would have stormed at me for my heartlessness in not proposing to come and live with her. Of course she made a tremulous fuss over all the arrangements. She was to have my own suite of rooms, and Murray was to be my coachman. And there was a spare coach-house and stable, which

Jackson could have for such carriages and horses as I chose to keep. Then she should feel satisfied that under all circumstances I was suitably attended.

So the cruel process of dismantling began. A few pieces of furniture and ornaments were sent to the Court, and all the rest of my worldly possessions were warehoused. The very day after I left the Deanery for good, and walked through the grounds to the Court, the footbridge was taken away, and an army of painters and upholsterers took possession of my childhood's home, to alter, rearrange, and decorate according to the fancy of the new Dean.

Aunt Marion was quite amiable by this time. She explained to Lady Alicia in particular, and the Close in general, that she had every reason to hope a certain sense of responsibility, forced upon me by my father's extraordinary eccentricity, had greatly steadied me; and that, after all, now that she was not so strong as she had been, it would really be an advantage, as she had no daughter, that she should have me in the house.

And Lady Alicia and all the Close responded, with varying but expressive intonation, that they sincerely trusted I might prove a comfort to her.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SPHINX.

MY father's death, sudden and unexpected as the time of its occurrence was, was a sort of climax in my life, reducing even the great scandal which had so shortly preceded it to the rank of a mere episode; an episode which Wichborough seemed disposed, in consideration of my newly-acquired importance, to relegate to oblivion. The Masons were gone abroad for a year, and Major Fordham had rather suddenly exchanged into a regiment in India. I was presumed to have had a sharp lesson, and a sobering shock, and being rich and independent,

the duty of condoning my youthful indiscretions naturally took clear and definite outline.

'When you are a hammer, strike ; when you are an anvil, bear,' says an old proverb. I had certainly occupied the latter position during the last few weeks of my father's life, and with, I think, as much fortitude and endurance as could be reasonably expected of me. And now there lay before me a stretch of comparative calm, during which I began to grow conscious how much that heavy hammering had done for me. The incidents which gave rise to it were not links in the chain of my destiny, but I doubt whether, without the tempering of that preliminary discipline, I should have got safely through the great climax which was fast drawing near.

It had been by no means from inclination that I had chosen the Court as my home, but in obedience to my father's last injunctions, to hold not only the wealth, but the life I had derived from him, as a solemn trust to be used for the welfare of others. Vocations were not then so ardently sought after as now, and the supererogatory merit of leaving your own kith and kin to fight their battles unaided, while you devoted your life to the service of strangers, did not suggest itself to me. In truth, it was not merit I sought, but the simple assurance that I was not leading a selfish life. The obviously unselfish life which lay ready to my hand was to devote myself still to the effort to hinder the perpetration of a great wrong. That effort I could certainly carry on with far better hope of success by actually living at the Court, than by following the infinitely preferable course, as far as inclination went, of establishing myself in an independent home, even in the neighbourhood.

The year that followed was a somewhat dreary, monotonous one. I gave Wichborough all the money it wanted, but resolutely declined its advances, a line of action for which I am sure it ought subsequently to have been most grateful to me. The atmosphere of the Court was terribly depressing. Colonel L'Estrange and Aunt Marion would singly have been enough to mar the harmony of any house with an undertone of discord ;

together, they pretty well managed to keep discord permanently in the ascendant. Then, although she had no power over me, Aunt Marion still felt it—perhaps all the more for that reason—her duty to advise me constantly, which naturally resulted in a discipline of small irritations which I found it harder to endure than the severer trials I had come through.

Surveying the scene, however, during that first incidentless year, rather from the stand point of a looker on, I very soon came to the conclusion that I had not taken up my abode at the Court a moment too soon. Aunt Marion had certainly altered much. I think my father's death had really given her a great shock. Her fussy tendency to interfere with everything and everybody, and her peculiar talent for irritating Colonel L'Estrange had thriven amazingly. Her capacity for saying and doing the wrong thing, at any given moment, was positively developing into actual genius. Moreover, to use a common phrase, she always appeared to me to have something on her mind. Still, as far as I could make out, and as far as Mr. Warren's observations went, Gilbert Wilbraham's designs had not advanced greatly. Colonel L'Estrange's lucky superstition still held stronger sway over his disordered mind, than either his aversion to Conrad, or his nephew's influence could overcome.

'You must use your utmost efforts to keep that superstition in flourishing condition,' Adrian Warren had said to me one day, not long after I went to the Court. 'Mr. Wilbraham, when he was here just at the time of the Dean's first illness, spoke to me about it with a degree of irritation which shows that he recognises it as a serious obstacle in his way. And above all things try and discover, if you possibly can, who in the house is in his pay?'

'You still believe that to be a fact?'

'More than ever. Being carefully on the watch, when Wilbraham was here, I detected a knowledge on his part of one or two trifling circumstances which he could not have known without being in communication with some one in the house.'

It was well to say watch, but that was not so easily done. The establishment at Wichenbrough Court was a very well

managed one. Servants were never visible. But for the fact of Colonel L'Estrange being exceedingly particular about their all appearing at prayers every morning, one might have lived in the house for years, without knowing one of them by sight, save the butler and the footmen. But at last, accident aroused a suspicion in my mind.

I could not regard my home at Wichenborough Court as anything more than a temporary one, so Waters was established in comfortable lodgings in Wichenborough, waiting until I had a house of my own for her to return to. These lodgings were just opposite the post-office, and it chanced one afternoon, as I was sitting with her, we saw the head housemaid at the Court come hurriedly down the street and post a letter. Waters laughed as she saw her.

'I am sure poor Parsons must have a love affair on, Miss Vera,' she said. 'Why else can't she send her letters in the post-bag? It must be very awkward for her to come out just now, so close on tea-time; and she always looks as if she was frightened to death less Martin should arrive with the bag just at the same time.'

'Does she post letters often herself?' I asked, my thoughts going off in a very different direction from Waters's speculations.

'Pretty often of late. Much oftener, Mrs. Shipley says, than before you lived at the Court. I don't think much of her. I never did. No more does Murray. She keeps a sharp look out upon your letters, or anything you leave lying about, my dear, I can tell you.'

A clue seemed suddenly placed in my hands. This was doubtless the source of Gilbert Wilbraham's knowledge. It was something to be thus far on our guard; but the danger was one it was so impossible to meet, that I think the information did little more than add to our uneasiness.

The first summer of my life at the Court was nearly over before Gilbert Wilbraham made one of his usual visits, and it puzzled as well as startled me a little, to observe that the announcement of his coming produced none of the usual

symptoms of worry and annoyance in Aunt Marion. I thought she seemed a little absent and preoccupied, but on the whole she was rather quieter than usual. Her greeting to him also, when he arrived, was far more cordial than on the last occasion when I had witnessed it. To me his appearance was a cause of gravely increased anxiety. In consequence of my father's illness I had not seen him on the occasion of his last visit, so it was close upon two years since we had met. There seemed to me an alarming change in him. He had lost something of that trim, well-cared for appearance which is significant of a man of refined personal habits. I could not say his appearance was slovenly, but it was not what it had been. He looked worn and haggard, and there was a restlessness about him at times which had something almost fierce in it. He struck me to have much the air of a desperate man.

He arrived about dinner time, and the next day I observed him and Aunt Marion strolling about the grounds together in a very friendly manner, and evidently absorbed in deep discussion. What strange turn was the game taking now? I fear I had come to form such an opinion of her that the possibility of her making terms for herself, and throwing her influence into the scale on Gilbert's side, did cross my mind. I was wrong that time, however. But nothing could ever have suggested to me the frantic idea which had seized upon my aunt's ill-regulated imagination.

'Poor Gilbert looks rather haggard, does he not?' she said to me, as we were drinking our coffee in the drawingroom that evening.

'Certainly he does,' I replied, wondering greatly what was coming.

'I really feel quite sorry for him,' she went on. 'He was telling me, this afternoon, they are dreadfully afraid Sir Brook is going to marry, quite a young woman, a very designing creature.'

'Well, if he chooses to do so, it is his own affair,' I said, making a mental note of the fact that as old Mr. Warren was still Sir Brook Wilbraham's agent, it was not very probable that I should not have heard of any such project through Adrian.

'That is just like your cold, heartless way of looking at things, Vera. Can you not see what a dreadful blow it will be for Gilbert if she should have a son? Of course he has been looked upon as the heir all his life, and I daresay he has not been very careful about his expenditure. It will be a dreadful thing for him if he is cut out now.'

'You seem wonderfully interested in his welfare all of a sudden,' I said.

'I never allow prejudice to influence my judgment,' she replied in her most sententious manner. 'Of course my opinion of Gilbert is not changed, but I can still feel sorry for him in what is really an unmerited misfortune; and I have always tried to do him justice. Besides, even you, I should think, might see that to lose Sir Brook's fortune is not the most likely way to decrease his anxiety to secure your poor uncle's property.'

'I have not the least doubt on that point.'

'Therefore you might easily see I have double reason for regret at any such chance. I hope, too, that I have Christian feeling enough about me to grieve over an increased temptation to do wrong being thrown in anyone's way. I am inclined myself to think Gilbert more the victim of circumstances than deliberately wicked. Were he in possession of a fairly comfortable fortune, I feel convinced he would be quite a different man, and the danger for my poor dear Conrad quite at an end.'

What in the world could be the meaning of this strange harangue? 'Heaven grant, then, some miraculous shower of gold may descend upon him,' I answered.

'Yes,' she said with much solemnity. 'I fear it would need a miracle. The miracle of the conversion of a selfish into a self-sacrificing nature.'

This was more mysterious still, but Gilbert's entrance at the moment put an end to the discussion. In vain I puzzled my brains as to what was the cause of this extraordinary change of front. The more so from the fact that when I told Adrian Warren what had passed, and received his assurance that he was certain the story about Sir Brook was a baseless fabrication, I

fancied, from his manner, that he in some way fathomed the mystery. I saw he turned very pale, and a set, hard look came over his face ; but he said nothing.

Aunt Marion kept up her portentous demeanour and her sphinx-like utterances. She was always dropping hints which seemed to imply that she and Conrad were victims who might easily be rescued from their painful position but for some one's perverse selfishness. But as these confidences were strewn with observations about Gilbert Wilbraham which indicated a vast amount of Christian charity in her attitude towards him, I could make nothing of it. Sometimes I really began to wonder if the fatal malady which had ended my father's life was not affecting her brain ?

With Gilbert Wilbraham himself I had sundry long and confidential discussions. He plied me most adroitly with delicate flattery, veiling most artful attempts to extract all sorts of information from me ; and all the time his manner was marked by a sort of subdued, tender melancholy which he so evidently intended I should observe, that I rather marvelled he did not confide to me the cruel misfortune that was hanging over him.

Week after week slipped away, and still he lingered on at the Court, puzzling me more and more with every day that passed. It seemed to me as if his designs were somewhat in abeyance. At least I saw little signs of any practising on Colonel L'Estrange, while his demeanour to his cousin, though still tinged by a certain amount of commiseration, had none of the contemptuous pity of former days : a fact, however, which might be due to certain sarcastic references to Fury, in which Colonel L'Estrange occasionally indulged. On the whole, odious though his presence was to me, I was inclined to rejoice that he did stay, as I felt sure a dread that he might at any moment bring up the great will question kept Colonel L'Estrange in a constant state of irritation against him.

It was reserved for Aunt Marion, quite unintentionally, to bring upon me a bewildering flood of enlightenment, and solve a long doubtful question. It chanced one evening, when Gilbert's

stay at the Court had been prolonged for nearly seven weeks, and I was beginning to wonder if he meant to make it his home for good, that she was taken with one of those fits of nervous fussing to which she was occasionally prone. She could neither be at peace herself, nor let anyone else have peace; and at length, about nine o'clock in the evening, she declared her sufferings to be quite unendurable.

'I really feel very ill, Vera; I am quite sure some illness is coming on. I think I shall go to bed.'

'I dare say that will be the best thing to do,' I said. 'Perhaps if you take a soothing draught you will drop off to sleep. Shall I ring for Baxter?'

'Oh, no doubt you are anxious to get rid of me. I see your whole soul is absorbed in that book. You know quite well a soothing draught is no use to me.'

'Good gracious, Aunt Marion, what do you want? It was your own proposition to go to bed.'

'But not to take a soothing draught, a thing that does me no good, when I am left alone in this nervous state. You know quite well to be read to is the only thing that helps me when I feel so ill and restless.'

'Very well, then,' I said, 'I will come and read to you.'

Somewhat mollified, she graciously accepted the offer, and after a stupendous amount of arranging and settling, and sending messages to the dining-room, she went off to her room, in company with Baxter. Thither, with meek resignation, I followed in due time, leaving with a sigh a book in which I was extremely interested; a fact, her discovery of which, I fully believe, in the state of irritable perversity common under an attack of nerves, had mainly led to her requiring my services as a reader.

The remedy, however, seemed to answer. For some two hours I sat and read to her some dreary trash which she professed greatly to admire; and when, at last, Baxter came to tell us that Colonel L'Estrange had gone to his dressing-room, she condescended to feel much more comfortable, and to hope she soon would be able to go to sleep.

I went off to my room, but the interesting point at which I had been forced to leave off my own reading was a severe temptation. It was only just eleven o'clock. I could get another hour without dangerously curtailing my night's rest. I was never very tolerant of the attentions of a lady's maid, so I shortly dismissed Murray to her bed, and as soon as the disappearance of the hall lamp told me the butler had ended his nightly rounds, I slipped quietly down in the dark to the drawing-room, intending to relight the lamp, which would have been left on the table, and read there until such time as I grew sleepy.

The fire had burnt so low that the room was almost totally dark. But I had a habit of going about in the dark, so that fact did not at all disturb me. The drawing-room was a large room, with the door near the lower end; opposite to it was a window, close by which stood a writing table. I cautiously made my way among the furniture to this table, knowing that I should find upon it some wax matches and a taper, by the aid of which I could relight the lamp. I could not, at the first moment, find the matches, and at that distance from the fireplace it was so dark I had to feel about very gently, lest I should knock over anything on the table. While I was thus occupied, my ears, which were pretty sharp, caught the sound of a door closing very gently. I started, and looked round. The sound came from the hall. I had left the drawing-room door partly open, and through it I discerned a dim light, flickering, and gradually increasing in volume. Someone carrying a candle was evidently approaching the drawing-room somewhat stealthily.

My instant conviction was that the intruder was Gilbert Wilbraham, in search probably of some book or paper left in the room, and my eager desire to avoid him, by any possible means, prompted me to slip round the table, and conceal myself behind the heavy velvet curtains which were drawn over the window. They had hardly ceased to vibrate with the motion caused by my passing behind them when the narrow slit left as they fell together again became a clearly defined downward streak through the darkness, showing that the bearer of the light had entered

the room. Still I heard no sound, there was not a symptom of anyone doing anything. What could it mean? Gilbert Wilbraham would certainly not have come to the drawing-room to stand motionless with a candle in his hand. After a moment's silent waiting I moved cautiously, so as to get a view of the room, from between the curtains. A bedroom candle, set down upon a table near the fireplace, shed a faint gleam over the room, and illuminated more particularly the figure of Parsons, the head housemaid, standing motionless on the hearthrug.

Hardly had I made this interesting discovery when I caught another sound, this time of footsteps, faint, but unmistakable. I hastily drew back into the corner, saw the streak of light increase in volume, then heard the door gently closed, and peeping forth again saw Gilbert Wilbraham set down another bedroom candle on the table, and join Parsons on the hearthrug.

CHAPTER XX.

M E L O D R A M A T I C .

SAFE in the gloom of the distant corner, and the deep shadow of the heavy curtains, I quietly watched the meeting. There was no symptom of vulgar intrigue about it. The air and manner of both was eminently business like.

'What on earth is up, Parsons?' Gilbert Wilbraham asked.
'I don't like meetings of this sort. They are never safe.'

'I couldn't help it. I've been watching for a chance to speak a word to you all the time you've been here, and never got one. I wanted to tell you things don't go on just as could be wished.'

'You don't think yourself any nearer your five hundred?'

'No. Further than ever, since Miss Dormer came to live in the house.'

'Ha! How is that?'

'Well, she's just one of that sort that keeps everything going in the house. She keeps the Colonel in a better humour. She

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contrives to prevent Mrs. L'Estrange from worrying him so much. He never goes on half so much about Mr. L'Estrange, and his being such an invalid either, when she is here. She brightens up Mr. L'Estrange, too, and it makes him seem better. The Colonel thinks a lot of her.'

'Humph. That might be useful.'

'Yes, to her cousin. She's as fond of Mr. L'Estrange as if he was her own brother. What I wanted to tell you was, that I'll be bound if the idea isn't in the Colonel's head now, it'll soon get there, to try and bring about a marriage between them.'

'She would never consent? An invalid like that!'

'I don't suppose she would. But the notion would keep the Colonel well occupied.'

'Does he care so very much for her?'

'More than for anyone else. She's got the knack of managing him without his knowing it. She contrives to drive some sense into him, and so he gets along better, and doesn't know why. Then he thinks it's because she's so sensible they hit it off so well.'

'What if I were to marry her myself?'

I do not know whether Parsons or I gave the more sudden start. For a moment my heart beat violently, for I had set the window curtains gently waving. But Parsons had her back turned to me, and Gilbert was looking down into the grate.

'Lord,' she said, 'I never thought of such a thing!'

'Nor I, until I found out what a good catch she is. Since then I have thought a good deal, and to some purpose. I have quite got the old lady on my side.'

'Never!'

'Yes I have. She's got some reason of her own for wishing it, but I cannot make out what. The thing I want is, to find out what her fortune really is!'

'It's a lot, I know.'

'Yes. But that is a vague quantity. I can't find out anything for certain. Mrs. L'Estrange doesn't know, and I dare not say a word to her cousin. He'd smell a rat in a minute. Can't you find out Parsons? I dare say her maid knows pretty well,

having been so long in the family. I'll make it worth your while if you find out.'

'I'll not find out from Murray this side of doomsday. But it's a lot, and she can't be spending the half of it. There'll be a heap of money lying soon, though I believe she gives away a quantity. It's a good notion, if you can carry it through.'

'It'll have to be that or something more certain about what the Colonel means to do, before long,' he replied, almost fiercely. 'Another year or two will find me at the extreme end of my tether. That cursed superstition of his has ruined everything, and it has seemed to me to grow stronger within the last few years.'

Parsons stood reflecting a little. 'It's a very good idea your marrying Miss Dormer,' she said. 'He's that fond of her, he'd be a deal more likely to favour you then. There's that, and there's another thing, Mr Wilbraham. I don't think the old lady 'll last very long. The Dean's death shocked her very much. She's greatly changed since. You'd stand in a far better position if she was away.'

'How so ?'

'Well, for all she worries him so much, he thinks a lot of her, and wouldn't like to do anything that would vex her ; and I know, for I overheard her say something to Baxter one day, that she wants him to put something in a will, if he makes one, about her, that he doesn't want to do. There'd be a much better chance of his signing a will if she was away.'

'I believe that. But I found out a thing the other day I wanted to tell you about. He took an extra glass of sherry at dinner the other night when Mr. L'Estrange was out, and it touched his head a little ; a trifle does that now. He got rather confidential, and a little inclined to assert himself. He told me he had two wills all ready drawn up, and it depended on circumstances which he should sign. I could not venture to ask many questions, for he was quite ready to mount the high horse ; but he kept dropping hints which made it pretty clear how they run. That's rather an ugly state of things, Parsons. You must

watch for me like a cat to find out if he does sign any paper of the sort. Remember, your own five hundred is at stake.'

'I'm not likely to forget that.'

'And there's another thing. I daren't say anything to Miss Dormer just now. You must watch, and send me word if you see anyone hanging about after her. She's safe to have suitors enough, with her fortune.'

'And what am I to get for that?'

'Why, hang it woman, isn't five hundred enough to cover all?'

'No, it isn't. What does it matter to me whether you win or lose, save for what it's worth to me in hard cash? And do you think I don't run a risk in watching for you, to help you to keep your head above water? I might chance to get found out any day. You haven't made me any promise about helping you about the heiress.'

'Well, what do you want?'

'Five hundred as agreed. Three if you get the heiress only. Seven if you get both.'

'You shall have it.'

'Very well, you can give it me in writing to-morrow. Then never fear but you shall have all the information that can be got. Now we'd better go. I don't care about such meetings any more than you do. The old lady gets terrible fidgets now at night, and I don't think the Colonel sleeps much. There's always a risk some one may be stirring. Good night. Don't come out of the room until I'm clear away.'

With that she took up her candle, and stole noiselessly away. Gilbert Wilbraham waited for a short time till all was still, and then quietly followed her. After another brief space of time had passed I also emerged from my concealment, and cautiously made my way in total darkness back to my own room.

Grave and startling as were the revelations of that brief conversation I felt, at the first moment, more inclined to laugh than to reflect seriously. The whole incident had been so deliciously melodramatic. I felt as if I had been taking part in a third rate comedy. Certainly I was entitled to a more leading one. If

Gilbert Wilbraham really believed there was the remote possibility of his ever persuading me to become his wife, my abilities as an actress, gave me a claim to a much more important part than that of listening behind a curtain, while the villain of the piece disclosed his sentiments to an accomplice. But unfortunately it was not melodrama. It was commonplace vulgar crime that was in question. A ruined gambler and profligate playing a desperate game with the dice of selfishness and disease to keep his own head above water. My laughing mood was but a passing one, and I had little sleep that night. All that I had never doubted seemed so much more tangible and definite in form now that I not merely firmly believed, but knew it to be a fact. Now also the dark sayings of the Sphinx became clear. It was in my assumed disinclination to place myself and my fortune at the disposal of an elderly gambler in desperate circumstances, in lieu of less certain, if larger profits, that Aunt Marion saw that lamentable selfishness of which she and Conrad were doomed to be the victims. I could not laugh over that phase of circumstances, for grave dread of the means by which it had been brought about. Gilbert Wilbraham must, by some means, have contrived to work Aunt Marion round into that mental condition, and my estimate of his importance as a dangerous enemy was thereby greatly increased. Then that fact, if it really was one, of the existence of the two wills ready for signature, terribly added to the peril of the situation. It rendered sudden action on Colonel L'Estrange's part, under the pressure of any excitement strong enough to overcome for the moment his superstitious terrors, so alarmingly easy.

Altogether I did not pass a comfortable night, and when we met at breakfast, I imagine I wore far more the harrassed, anxious look of a desperate conspirator than Gilbert Wilbraham did. Whether the suggested probability of Colonel L'Estrange outliving Aunt Marion had inspired him with a renewed sense of cheerful hopefulness I know not, but I thought the tender melancholy of his demeanour towards myself, which in the light of the late revelations seemed to me more apparent

than formerly, was certainly tinged by a greater buoyancy of spirits ; and really the anxious solicitude with which he inquired after Aunt Marion's health, and the affectionate regret with which he announced that he must bring his long and all too delightful visit to an end the next day, were quite artistic performances.

I had my work before me, however, and it was work I did not like ; but it must be done, so I mounted the cob as soon as breakfast was over, and made my way through devious paths to the Manor. I hated going there ; hated it more than ever, since that poor, commonplace little woman had stood up so gallantly in my defence, simply, I believe, because of a feeling due to the fact that I had never treated her with the patronising condescension of the Wichborough county circle. I always felt, when in Mrs. Warren's house, a feeling of humiliation, for which I could only find relief in making my manner to Adrian as cold and purely business-like as was possible.

Poor little woman ! she had always greeted me since the Fordham episode with a sort of half timid cordiality which chafed me unspeakably. ' You are an early visitor this morning, Miss Dormer,' she said, when I entered her drawing-room. ' I hope there is nothing wrong at the Court ? '

' Oh, no,' I answered. ' I am only the bearer of a communication I wanted Mr. Warren to have before he went out, if possible.'

' I think he is just outside. I will look for him,' she replied, as she left the room.

He came in a few moments. I think his manner to me was always more cold and guarded in his own house than anywhere else, whether on my account or his wife's I know not. He heard what I had to say, the which did not include my own personal interest in Mr. Wilbraham's schemes, with undisguised anxiety. He began to walk up and down the room, a symptom of pre-occupation very uncommon in him.

' It is a very grave state of things,' he said. ' But I am glad you have so satisfactorily determined who is the traitor. She is

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less dangerous in that capacity than some of the others might have been ; and having clearly no object to serve but her own aggrandisement, she will be tolerably careful not to run any very serious risks.'

'But the two wills ! Do you think that story is true ?'

'I am sadly afraid it is only too likely to be so. I have noticed the circumstance of which Wilbraham spoke myself. Colonel L'Estrange is very easily affected now by any stimulant. Half a wine glass more than his usual quantity will influence him just in the way he described, but I have never known him make any false statement under these circumstances ; only show more inclination to talk about his own doings and private affairs than is usual with him. I cannot but think all the chances are in favour of the truth of the story.'

'But would not the conversation I overheard be enough to overturn a will in Mr. Wilbraham's favour ?'

He shook his head. 'I fear not, if you have repeated it correctly.'

'I am sure I have done that.'

'I was watching all you said with that thought in my mind. But Mr. Wilbraham is too astute. There was not a single word which could be construed into proof of an undue influence, or that he hoped for anything more than a handsome legacy from his uncle. However discreditable such proceedings might be to him, socially, all you heard would rather go to prove he had nothing on earth to do with the making of the will ; had merely bribed a woman to give him information with which he hoped to keep his creditors quiet. You may depend upon it, he will have given no accomplice the least chance of proving against him any undue influence.'

'What then can we do ?'

'Simply nothing. Any attempt to make use of the information you have secured might only precipitate a catastrophe. We can but wait, and act from day to day as circumstances indicate ; and pray that Mrs. L'Estrange may survive her husband.'

That was not a very consolatory assurance with which to ride

home again, but I think it roused in me a more dogged spirit of persistency than I had possessed before. Various little circumstances I had observed, since I had been living at the Court, had inclined me very strongly to the opinion that the lives of neither Colonel L'Estrange nor Aunt Marion were very likely to be long ones. It might be, if we could only ward off the danger for a few more years, a very few as compared to the number which it had already existed, it might all in a moment cease to have any further power to trouble us. To see Conrad safely in possession of his rightful inheritance would be a reward sufficient to repay any amount of labour and anxiety.

From that day forward I seemed to enter upon a new phase of the Wichborough Court question. Knowing accurately, where hitherto I had only believed, or strongly suspected, I seemed to have a far more definite foe to grapple. Aunt Marion's tactics, also, threw an element of grim irony into the situation. They were such a curious revelation of the fantastic performances possible to a mind turning on the point of habitual selfishness. She set herself to do Gilbert Wilbraham's wooing for him with an ingenious perversity of sentiment, and distortion of fact, which were simply amazing. I had yet to learn how much remorse was urging her in the direction of persuading herself that the situation might be saved by my merely making a sacrifice of no great moment, and involving no very particularly disastrous after-consequences for me.

But for my unsuspected knowledge of the full scope of Gilbert Wilbraham's designs, I suppose Aunt Marion and I must have shortly come to an explanation. Some outspoken expression of my sentiments would probably have drawn her into an avowal. As it was I took to diplomatic fencing. I was anxious to stave off, as long as I possibly could, the chance of her plainly telling me that Gilbert Wilbraham had done me the honour to see in me a desirable means of mending his ruined fortunes, and having to upbraid me for my selfishness in refusing thus to promote her own and Conrad's interests. As long as Mr. Wilbraham could be kept in the belief that my marrying him was a possible

contingency, the more chance there was of his not energetically pressing on his further designs.

Thus in constant fear, watchfulness, and anxiety, another year slipped away, and I still believed no step had been taken by Colonel L'Estrange with regard to settling his property. Gilbert Wilbraham had been abroad for most of the time, whether voluntarily or of necessity, I am not sure. I imagine that though his larger creditors were well enough content to wait, rather than run the risk of ruining their own future chances by precipitate action, the smaller fry made a lengthened residence in England very uncomfortable to him.

At length, however, when autumn had again come round, he wrote to propose a long visit to the Court. Aunt Marion who had, I thought, failed a good deal in general health during the year, seemed much excited over this proposition; so much so, that I strongly suspected it would not pass without my being driven into some definite statement of my sentiments. I knew several letters had passed between her and Gilbert, and her mysterious hints grew more frequent and broad, so that my fencing powers were pretty sharply tested.

Whether the final catastrophe was the result of deliberate intention on her part, or was accidentally brought about by her unsatisfactory mental and physical state, I have never felt quite certain. But one evening, within a week of Mr. Wilbraham's intended arrival, she brought up the subject, with an evident amount of nervous excitement which filled me with grave forebodings.

'Poor Gilbert,' she said, 'I do hope his visit here will be a pleasant one. He tells me that he has positive evidence that Sir Brook is engaged to that horrid woman, if indeed they are not already privately married. I feel really very sorry for him, and of course, all the more anxious about your uncle's will. It is doubly hard, too, to feel the danger might so easily be greatly lessened.'

'It is no use forecasting misfortunes,' I discreetly replied. 'I could not think Sir Brook is a man very likely to contract a

private marriage. But even had he done so, there is clearly no son at present.'

'Oh, of course, it is very easy for you to make light of the danger,' she replied with growing irritation. 'It does not make any difference to you. You have your fortune all safe, and can take dangers very lightly that only threaten other people. I cannot think where you get your selfishness, Vera. It certainly is no trait of your father's family.'

'But surely,' I said, dreading alike to speak or be silent, 'it is useless to fret about a danger which at present has no existence, and which there is no means of averting. At present it is quite uncertain whether Sir Brook is even married, quite certain he has no son, and that he is on good terms with his nephew. What is the use of Mr. Wilbraham worrying himself about a problematical danger which may never arise?'

'Pshaw, I have no patience with your narrow selfish views. That is always the way. Selfish people always take such narrow views, and then call it their good sense. You know quite well that I was not thinking of that danger when I said it might be easily lessened; but of how that danger to Gilbert increased Conrad's and my danger, about which you profess to feel so anxious. And you know quite well, she continued, with increasing excitement of manner, how it might be lessened. You pretend to be blind, but I know quite well you are not really so. You must have seen that Gilbert is deeply in love with you, and I am sure a wife he loved, and a comfortable income, would make him a man with whom any woman might be very happy. I know Sir Brook would greatly like the marriage, and it would be most suitable in every way. Then I know Gilbert would feel quite differently, and your influence would be quite sufficient to remove all danger about your uncle's will. You might easily remove all this worry and anxiety which is slowly killing me, if you really cared about it.'

There was no longer any possibility of fencing. 'You are both right and wrong, Aunt Marion,' I said. 'That Mr. Wilbraham is in love with me, I have not seen; that he would like

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to have my fortune at his disposal, I am very well aware. But am I to understand that he has commissioned you to speak to me on the subject ?'

'No. But I know that he is coming here with the intention of proposing to you.'

'Then,' I said, you will be doing him a kindness if you tell him it is perfectly useless for him to do anything of the sort, as nothing could ever induce me to become his wife.'

'I knew how it would be. You do not really care a bit if Conrad and I are left beggars, and I believe you are always thinking about Major Fordham, who never had the least thought of marrying you, or he would have treated you with more respect. And I must say I think it disgraceful, Vera, simply disgraceful for you to have treated Gilbert as you have done, and corresponded with him, and all that, if you do not mean to accept him. You have been most selfish and heartless. I always said you would never come to any good, and . . . and . . .

She drew her breath with a sort of scream, and for a moment seemed to me as if she was going to choke. I rang the bell in great alarm, and just as the footman appeared, she burst into a violent fit of hysterics.

'Send Baxter,' I said ; and in a short time we succeeded in getting her conveyed safely upstairs, and into bed.

CHAPTER XXI.

GATHERING CLOUDS.

AUNT MARION continued very ill all that night, restless, feverish, and quite unable to sleep. When Dr. Brydges came in the morning he looked very grave. She seemed, he said, to be suffering from an attack of low fever, but all the symptoms were unsatisfactory, especially a marked absence of all rallying power. Were the stars in their courses fighting for Gilbert Wilbraham ? Parsons's prophetic utterances were at

least so far justified that Colonel L'Estrange showed far more anxiety and distress than I had in the least expected.

'I do not like your aunt's looks, Vera,' he said to me. 'I am convinced she is more seriously ill than Dr. Brydges thinks. I think I shall write and beg Gilbert to put off his visit for a few days until we see how she goes on. This is very distressing to me, and I do not feel inclined to have visitors in the house.'

To this suggestion I cordially assented. I felt quite sure the news of Aunt Marion's illness would be no news to Mr. Wilbraham, and that he would be very content under the circumstances, to put off his visit. I had no doubt his spirits were already rising, as well as that Parsons was even now in imagination fingering her five hundred pounds at least. I did not myself take a hopeful view of Aunt Marion's case. If her illness ended fatally, then the death struggle would begin. How long would it last? Who would come out of it victorious?

Before a fortnight had passed away it became very evident that there was small chance Aunt Marion would ever leave her bed again. A continuance of fever caused a drain on her strength which the want of rallying power rendered most serious.

'She is certainly very ill,' Dr. Brydges said to me one day in the drawingroom after he had seen her. 'Under any circumstances I should feel doubtful of the result. As it is, I am convinced there is no chance for her unless you can find out and relieve whatever mental anxiety is preying upon her. There is something preying on her mind. It may possibly be merely some trifle, which her weakness leads her to exaggerate. But whatever it is, it is having a most injurious effect upon her.'

Dr. Brydges was not in the family confidence. I could only say that she had always been a very nervous, excitable woman, prone to worry herself about trifles, and deplorably deficient in all power to estimate the relative value of things, and that I thought her present weak state exaggerated these tendencies. Dr. Brydges shook his head.

'I think there is something definite, some special source of mental uneasiness. Try and find out, if possible,'

Unfortunately I had no need to try. She was always looking at me with an imploring look in her eyes which cut me to the heart. It said to me, as plainly as if she had put it into words, 'If you would only consent to marry Gilbert Wilbraham, you would save my life and your cousin's fortune.' She never actually mentioned the subject, but she kept on telling me that nothing could be done for her; nothing could cure the malady under which she was sinking.

Sometimes, after lying for a long time looking at me with those wistful imploring looks, she would give a heavy sigh, and turn her head wearily away, and then I often saw tears slowly rolling down her wasted cheeks. I could not then, when I saw her lying there weak and helpless, fall back upon the thought of how fatally her own selfishness had aided to bring about all that most distressed her. Even had I known the full extent of its mischievous influence I do not think it would have been, to any extent, a consolatory remembrance. I really began to have a sort of nervous haunting feeling that I was murdering her. Her pitiful looks cut me to the heart, and all sorts of uneasy doubts and sensations began to creep over me at times. Was I doing right? Was not selfishness prompting my own action? Should I not have acted differently, but for the love I cherished for the husband of another woman?

I do not think the idea of giving in, and consenting to marry Gilbert Wilbraham ever actually crossed my thoughts, but I am not sure that I was not tending in that direction, from the mere force of persistent pressure against weakened powers of resistance. The truth was I was thoroughly overdone. Poor Aunt Marion was not a woman likely to be less exacting in illness than in health, and her demands upon me were unceasing. I imagine she hoped to move me by persistent displays of her sufferings and her sorrows. Certainly, in spite of the remonstrances of both Baxter and Murray, she gave me little rest, day or night.

As it became more and more apparent that the tendency was downward, rather than upward, Colonel L'Estrange's evident distress suggested to me the possibility of using Aunt Marion's

condition as a means to induce him to make a just and reasonable will, such as should have a tendency to soothe and allay her anxieties, in view either of her recovery or death. The idea did not appear to me in any other light than that of a forlorn hope, but a sort of feverish desire to do something had taken possession of me. I was not rash enough to proceed with such a project on my own responsibility, but I sent for Adrian Warren to come, that I might consult him on the subject. He was at the Court almost every day, but I wanted him to come at the time when Colonel L'Estrange always went out for an hour or two.

I was in Aunt Marion's room when word was brought to me that he was in the drawingroom. Murray had in her hand a few magnificent roses, from a very late blooming tree, for which the Manor was famous. Adrian had brought them for Aunt Marion.

'Is he down stairs?' she asked, as I showed them to her.

'Yes,' I said. 'I am just going to speak to him, while you have your luncheon.'

'I should like to see him, Vera. Tell him so. I will send a message as soon as I am ready.'

Wondering what this might portend, I went down stairs. As I described to Adrian Warren Aunt Marion's restless, disturbed condition, ascribing it in general terms to her anxiety about the state of affairs, I saw the same look of pain and determination I had noticed once before gather over his face; but he was entirely opposed to the scheme I had hit upon.

'The certainty of irritating Colonel L'Estrange dangerously, is about the only certainty there would be in the attempt,' he said. 'You judge of others too much by yourself, Miss Dormer. I have noticed what you observe in Colonel L'Estrange. He is undoubtedly much distressed about Mrs. L'Estrange, but the selfish element protrudes at every point. In his feelings towards her now, there is a certain tinge of irritation because she is causing him worry and anxiety. The moment it became apparent to him that she was to be used as a means to urge a disagreeable subject upon him, you would see a great change in his sentiments. It is only for so long as she is no source of

active annoyance to him that his affection for her, such as it is, will hold the mastery over his less amiable qualities.'

'Poor Aunt Marion,' I said, wearily. 'Then I fear there is nothing that can be done for her.'

'No,' he said, with marked emphasis, 'there is nothing, absolutely nothing. I can quite understand your feelings towards her, now you see her weak and ill. They are those of every generous nature. But you must not let sentiment override judgment, or allow yourself to be led into Quixotic attempts to fight that stern immutable law, that as is the sowing so shall be the harvest. I have strong reasons for believing that Mrs. L'Estrange's selfishness has played a more important part in this complicated struggle than we are fully aware. She must reap the fruit of her own sowing.'

There was almost an angry ring in his voice, but I had no time to reply. Just at the moment Baxter came to take him upstairs.

The interview was rather a long one, which I, enjoying the now somewhat rare luxury of certainty I should not be wanted for something every ten minutes, passed lying idly back in an easy chair, revolving Mr. Warren's words and manner, with a half-uneasy dread growing up within me that he had some knowledge or suspicion of Aunt Marion's designs. Tired nature, however, asserted her empire, and all my sensations and perceptions were growing very hazy and indistinct when I was suddenly startled from my drowsiness by Adrian Warren abruptly re-entering the room. He was very pale, and his manner showed a great deal of suppressed agitation.

'Is Aunt Marion worse?' I exclaimed, starting up.

'No, no. She is not worse. She is none the better for the interview, but that is her own fault.'

'Mr. Warren what have you been saying to her?'

'Nothing but what the last mad scheme evolved out of her own ineradicable selfishness necessitated.'

I made no reply. I knew by that answer what had been Aunt Marion's object in demanding the interview. She had hoped to

secure Adrian Warren as an ally in her attack upon what she was pleased to call my habitual selfishness. Right well did I understand, now, his agitation and his wrath.

'I had divined what was in contemplation,' he continued, after a moment's silence, 'but, of course, I said nothing. Neither should I do so now, but that I feel sure she will speak to you of what passed between us. Of course, in consideration of her weak state, I strove to speak as calmly as possible; but I could not altogether conceal my indignation at being supposed capable of making any effort to further so infamous a project.'

'Infamous,' I repeated.

'Yes, unquestionably. Good heavens, is it possible it has appeared to you in any other light?'

'It has appeared to me simply abhorrent. But everything has been very trying. She accuses me of being selfish; and she looks at me so pitifully. Sometimes I have felt quite confused. There is so much worry and fatigue, I get very little rest. I don't think I am fit to judge on any point. But sometimes—I—I begin to fear.'

I hesitated. I wanted to hear from him that I was right; to hear his clear sound judgment confirm the decision over which my wearied brain and over-strained nervous system seemed at times to waver. But how to put it into words. . . . In a moment he caught me up, and as he spoke his rich musical voice had that peculiar vibration only perceptible in it when deep tenderness was the sentiment which inspired his words.

'Hush, dear, not another word. I quite understand. And now I do say from my heart, thank God that, at all costs, you are safely guarded from the risk of your boundless capacity for self-sacrifice carrying you beyond all justifiable limits. For you, such a suggestion would be simple infamy. But, under any circumstances, rest undoubtfully on my judgment, the judgment I should have given had I never even seen you. Speaking merely as on a point respecting which my age and sex give me a great advantage over you in judging, I say unhesitatingly, that any thought of a marriage between a young girl like yourself,

and a man of Mr. Wilbraham's age and character combined is a degradation. Nothing could justify your entertaining any such proposition for a single moment, even with advantages far greater and more certain than they are. Knowing all I do know, so revolting does the suggestion appear to me, that I can only account for Mrs. L'Estrange's infatuation on the hypothesis that she has but little knowledge of Mr. Wilbraham's real character.'

'Thank you a thousand times,' I said. 'You have always guided me wisely and rightly. It is hard to judge when one is harassed and worn out.'

'Poor child, poor child,' he said. 'You have been thrust early into the furnace.'

'I must go upstairs,' I said rising. 'Aunt Marion will be expecting me. Good-bye.'

I hastily left the room without another word, and reached my own sitting-room shaking from head to foot with agitation and alarm. If I had stayed down stairs another moment, I should have told Adrian Warren that the fiercest furnace in which I could be plunged had no terrors for me so long as I knew his love was wholly given to me. Honour and rectitude had nearly failed then to hold love bound in silent bondage. But was it self that had gained strength to nearly bring me under the sway of impulse? I did not think so. I gave myself the credit I believed I deserved, that it was only the weakness resulting from fatigue and strain which had brought me into danger. I had only faltered. Had I fallen, I believe Adrian Warren's resignation of his post would have been in Colonel L'Estrange's hands within twenty-four hours. I registered a solemn resolution to hold no more conferences with him, save on the most purely business subjects, until rest and quiet had restored my moral and mental, as well as my physical tone.

Contrary to Adrian's expectations Aunt Marion said nothing to me about their conversation; neither did she, after that day, continue either by word or gesture to press me on the subject. It may be that Adrian's evident indignation had startled her; but I am inclined to think that gradually increasing weakness

began to deaden her interest in everything. It was not until a very few days before her death that I gained a full insight into the workings of her mind.

I was sitting beside her in the evening, reading while she seemed to be dozing, when I suddenly heard her give a slight sob.

'What is the matter, dear?' I asked. 'You must not excite yourself, you know.'

'I am dying, Vera,' she said.

'No, you are not,' I answered. 'You are dangerously ill, and very weak. But you are not dying.'

'Yes, I am. I may live a short time, but I am a dying woman. I have known that ever since your father died. I always had a feeling I should not long outlive him. And I have been so unhappy ever since, knowing I was going to die, and that I have ruined Conrad all for no use.'

I thought her mind was wandering. 'You must not trouble yourself about that,' I said. 'Conrad does not think you have done him any harm.'

'Conrad does not know what I have done, no more do you. I thought you might marry Gilbert, and then you would be able to hinder the mischief. But I know you won't.'

'No. You must not think of that. It is quite impossible.'

'So Mr. Warren said. He was dreadfully angry I am sure, he got so white. He said it was infamous, so I must die with little hope. But you will not leave them, Vera? You will stay here, and try and help Conrad? Promise me that you will.'

'I certainly will if I can. But you know, Aunt Marion, I must do as Colonel L'Estrange wishes.'

'Oh, I am sure he will wish it. He is very fond of you. That makes it all the harder that you will not marry Gilbert. You could have done so much with your uncle.'

'Don't talk any more about it. You may be quite sure neither Mr. Warren nor I shall ever cease to work for Conrad.'

'Yes. But I want to tell you about it. I think I shall feel happier. I never felt so much about it until I felt I was not

going to live so long as your uncle. Oh, Vera, it was I prevented him from settling everything all right for Conrad?'

'You, Aunt Marion? Impossible!'

'I wish it was impossible. But it is quite true. It was that time he had bronchitis so badly, before your mother died. When he was so weak and ill then, he seemed quite changed. I think he was sorry he had treated Conrad as he did. I suppose when he was so weak and helpless he felt differently about people not being strong. He would not make his will, because of his silly superstition, but I think he wanted to settle things once for all, without making a will. He wanted to make some sort of settlement, not exactly a will, but a settlement which he could not undo again. I did not quite understand about it, but I made out that he meant Conrad to have everything, and that he should make some further arrangement for me, beyond my settlement. I did not want him to do that. I thought in time I should be able to get him to make his will, and leave me just what I wanted, so I kept always putting him off the idea. I thought his illness had changed him so much that Gilbert would not be able to influence him again as he had done, and that there would be no further danger for Conrad. But as he grew stronger and better, he began to change again, and just the same as he was before; and it seemed to me as if Gilbert had more influence over him after that illness than he had before. And oh, Vera, that is the worst part of it. He has often told me since, when he was irritated, that the only sensible thing he ever knew me do was my preventing him making a fool of himself when he was ill and weak, by making a settlement he could not undo. I did not think so much about it until your father died. I always thought we should manage him some way. But since I have felt sure I should not live long the thought of what I had done has haunted me. If I had only let him make the settlement he wanted, Conrad would have been safe, and it would have been all the same to me. It has made me so unhappy. He will be more likely to disinherit Conrad when I am gone, and it is all my fault that he can do it. I have ruined my son and gained nothing.'

It was a miserable revelation, but there was clearly nothing to be done but to try and soothe her last hours, poor woman!

'You must not say you have ruined him, Aunt Marion,' I answered. 'Colonel L'Estrange has not made a will yet. We may be able to keep him from doing so. We shall leave no stone unturned to prevent it.'

She faintly shook her head. 'He will do it when I am gone, you will see. I have more influence with him than people think. You will find, when I am gone, he will be more set against Conrad than he is now. I had a faint hope, as long as I could still hope you would marry Gilbert. That is the only way you could have gained power to stop the mischief. But when you said so positively nothing could ever induce you to do so, I seemed to break down all at once. I know how determined you are, when you make up your mind, and I felt there was no more hope, and I could not hold up any longer.'

She looked at me, then, with such a piteous pleading look, that my heart bled for her. Was it all true, or had remorse, acting upon her enfeebled mind, exaggerated into a definite design some mere passing mood of her husband's, which her selfish fears had simply induced her to allow to pass without any effort to make use of it? I know not. Her mind was clear enough, but she was very weak. Her state was certainly not that in which the absolute accuracy of her memory, regarding points which had long been the subject of much excited feeling, could be depended upon. Moreover, her looks and manner roused a suspicion in me, even then, that she cherished a last lingering hope this pitiful appeal would move me.

But though my heart might bleed, my resolution was immovable. 'For you it would be simple infamy.' I would sacrifice much for her, more for Conrad. But in all the wide world there was nothing that could have induced me to render myself infamous in Adrian Warren's eyes. To the last hour of my life, at whatever cost, I would be able to look him fearlessly in the face, and feel that I was worthy of his love.

I spoke gently and soothingly, trying to induce her still to be-

Never it possible we might frustrate Gilbert's purposes. But she only answered with sighs and gestures of incredulity, and I soon saw that her attention was flagging, and that she seemed inclined to doze.

That was the last time she alluded to the subject ; the last time I think when it had any power to disturb her dying hours. She lingered for a few days, but mostly in a sort of doze, showing very little consciousness of what was going on round her. And at last, with only one long drawn sigh, the weary spirit passed away, leaving amidst all those earthly possessions about which it had toiled and fretted unceasingly, but the lifeless clay which needed of them all but a niche in the family vault.

CHAPTER XXII.

PLOT AND COUNTER-PLOT.

THE ending of the long battle of life for Aunt Marion unquestionably hurried on the hour of its fiercest conflict for me. However much or little there may have been of exaggerated self-condemnation in her last sad confession to me of fruitless selfishness I began to see, even before the funeral, symptoms which tended to show that her prophecy as to the results of her death was due to one of those shrewd intuitions which had at all times streaked, at intervals, the curious medley of her vague and baseless sentiments and opinions. There was an unquestionable change for the worse in Colonel L'Estrange's manner to Conrad. He showed more irritability, and more of a sort of impatient contempt in all his dealings with him.

Gilbert Wilbraham, of course, arrived in time for the funeral, and I persuaded myself that I detected an under-current of triumph beneath the subdued gravity of his demeanour. I dare-say it was not really there ; that I only detected what I believed existed. At any rate it spurred my determination, if it needed any spurring, to fight him to the last ; and it certainly rendered

it very difficult for me to keep up the gracious manner I deemed it politic to preserve. He was very amiable and most attentive to me, and the tender melancholy reappeared so unmistakably that I could not but feel sure I should be forced, before he left, to greatly strengthen his desperate determination to secure, if by any means it could be done, the bulk of his uncle's property.

The thought caused me many an anxious hour. If I tried to stave off the inevitable moment, I at least infused an element of uncertainty into all his schemes ; but then my action tended to keep him hanging about the Court, and that was more dangerous now there was no longer a wife to be constantly about Colonel L'Estrange. If I drew him on, and refused him, he must leave the Court, for a time at least ; but then I made him more desperate, and therefore more dangerous. It was a Gordian knot, which, as generally happens, accident cut while prudence hesitated to meddle with it.

Colonel L'Estrange summoned me to the library, about a fortnight after Aunt Marion's death, for a solemn business conference. Whatever his faults and failings might be, his kindness to me, from the time of my return from school, had been unvaried. I was the one person with whom he never seemed to be irritable, or, as far as I was personally concerned, unreasonable.

'We must settle, Vera,' he said, 'what changes in arrangements our sad loss necessitates. I hope, my dear that it does not make you wish to leave Wichborough Court.'

'Most certainly not,' I replied, 'if you wish me to remain.'

'Unquestionably I do. Your residence here has been in all respects quite a boon to me, especially in the relief it has afforded me from all anxiety about proper care of my dear wife, during her last illness. I can only say, as I have said a thousand times to myself, I wish you had been her daughter, instead of her niece.'

'Oh, you must not say that,' I answered, trying, as I always did, to turn off his thoughts from that point, by a jest. 'If Aunt Marion had had charge of me in childhood, I should not have

been such a wild Bohemian that everyone is afraid of me. I daresay I should have been snapped up ere now, and been away in a home of my own.'

'Humph! You are not so very old yet; I may not keep you very long. However, more of that another time. At least it is a consolation to me to know that I am not to be left alone to the unrelieved contemplation of the great disappointment of my life. But you must understand the position I wish you to occupy. I wish you, in all respects, to take your aunt's place in the house; to be as completely mistress of it as she was. You had better, I think, retain Baxter as housekeeper. A woman of her trustworthiness and experience will save you much of the responsibility of so large an establishment. For the rest, you are to be sole and absolute mistress, from whose decision on any point there is to be no appeal, even to myself. If you should have any fault to find with the men-servants, you will, of course, mention it to me.'

'You are reposing a great deal of confidence in me,' I said.

'Not a particle more than you fully merit, my dear. It is I who shall reap advantage from the arrangement. It is a great satisfaction to me to find you do not wish to leave us. I feared you might wish for a little more lively sort of existence.'

'I should be very sorry to leave the Court,' I said, not without a momentary twinge as to the exact nature and extent of the inclination which sweetened the duty. Colonel L'Estrange was silent for a few moments. Then he said, rather abruptly—

'You are much attached to your cousin, Vera.'

This was getting among the breakers. But I answered at once—

'I should be most ungrateful were I not, Colonel L'Estrange. I am sure you have not the least idea how very kind Conrad used to be to me, when I was a child. It was he who rescued me from the claws of that most hateful of governesses, Miss Lambert: besides, in a number of ways, adding to my happiness. And since I have grown up, he has always been the kindest of

brothers to me. I should be very cold-hearted if I was not sincerely attached to him.'

He gave his shoulders a shrug. 'I am glad of it, very glad of it,' he said. 'Now you understand your position, my dear. Make all your own arrangements. By the bye, I am thinking of undertaking a somewhat heavy task. I have lighted upon some curious books lately. I am thinking of recasting the manuscript of my 'Prophecies Fulfilled.' I think I see my way to make it a very valuable work. The occupation will distract my thoughts just now.'

'I think you could not do better,' I said. And then, with a few more kind expressions, I was dismissed.

Why was he glad of my avowed attachment to Conrad? Verily, it was ill forecasting in the course of a crooked mind. I had made the avowal in fear and trembling, simply because I could not do otherwise, and had no temptation to attempt dissimulation, where I knew it would be worse than useless. And the only thing I had said with decided fear of the results, was the thing he appeared to have heard with the most satisfaction. Yet the remark about the great disappointment of his life certainly indicated no decrease in his irritation against his son.

Fortunately Baxter and I had always been great friends, so my instalment as mistress of the house did not result in any of those small explosions which generally cause a change of government to be a source, for a time, of domestic discomfort. But should I get rid of Parsons? I consulted Adrian Warren on that point.

'Have you anything to allege against her?' he asked.

'Nothing. She is an excellent servant, and her conduct is unimpeachable.'

'Then, I should say, do nothing of the kind. Firstly, because your doing so would probably arouse suspicions as to your motive. Secondly, because with her, you are forearmed. If Mr. Wilbraham is prepared to bribe so heavily, you would probably only replace a known spy by an unknown one. The danger is thickening, Miss Dormer; there is no question of that. I think it

will be better to fight complications we know, than to risk those of which we may not be aware.'

A few mornings afterwards, I had a long consultation over the arrangements with Baxter; and she had just left me with a table covered with books and papers, into an exhaustive study of which I was about to plunge, in order thoroughly to master all the methods of household management which had been in use at the Court, and which I strongly suspected had been both elaborate and promiscuous, when Gilbert Wilbraham suddenly looked in at the door. That was one of his ways. He was always prowling about the house, looking into every room in search of somebody to whom he particularly wanted to say something. Generally the person he found was not the person he wanted; but this time it was me. Though whether he was deliberately searching for me, or only quickly caught at a favourable chance, I know not.

'Oh, I see you are very busy, Miss Dormer,' he said. 'I was going to ask you if you would not come for a ride? The long confinement has told upon you, I think. A ride this nice fresh morning would do you good.'

'Thank you,' I said. 'I am too busy to go out this morning.'

'Why what in the world are you doing?' he asked, coming into the room. 'You might be a professional auditor setting to work.'

'I am only preparing for my new duties. Aunt Marion's household arrangements were rather intricate. It will take me a little time to master them.'

He made no reply, but walked to the window, and stood looking out for a moment or two. Then he turned round, and drawing forward a chair, sat down with an air of resolution which I felt portended business of some sort.

'Is it any use for you to take up that burden?' he asked.

'Certainly, if I am to continue to make the Court my home.'

'But that is the very point at issue. Is the Court to continue to be your home? Unless you are quite certain of that, it is

useless trouble for you, and no special gain for the establishment, that you should assume the charge of it.

Instantly I divined what was coming, but with the divination came a flash of inspiration. Was it absolutely necessary for me to render him more desperate and more dangerous? Was there not a middle course between two extremes? I had not the slightest moral hesitation about playing him, to any extent. The idea was quite sufficiently hateful to prevent my feeling any dread that inclination was swaying judgment. I loathed the bare suggestion. But Conrad!—

'I have certainly no intention of seeking any other home,' I discreetly replied.

'But what if another home seeks you? I have been singularly maladroit, Miss Dormer, if I have failed to let you see how very deeply my own happiness is concerned in that question. Perhaps you will think me very audacious, considering the great difference in our ages, for venturing to cherish a hope I might win your love. But I know you have had proof, in the case of your own parents, that disparity in age is no hindrance in the way of a very happy marriage. And I cannot but think, quite independently of my own wishes, that you are singularly fitted to find happiness in a marriage with a man considerably your senior.'

How well he was doing it! Could I only get him to go on a little longer, to give me a few moments more for reflection!

'Really, Mr. Wilbraham,' I said, 'you have taken me greatly by surprise.'

'Then I fear I have been a great bungler. I know I am not, at the moment, what the world could call an excellent match. In fact, considering how different is your own position in that respect, I could hardly have ventured to cherish the hopes I have done were it not for the certainty that ere very long I shall be able to give you a title, and such a position as is your due. I know I had the best wishes of your aunt. Indeed I had her promise, sadly frustrated, that she would herself plead my cause. Colonel L'Estrange, I am sure, would regard such an alliance with the greatest satisfaction, and I know that Sir Brook

would welcome you as a daughter. I wish I could feel as certain of your favourable consideration of my suit, as I do that its success would afford the most unalloyed gratification to all the connections on both sides.'

'I am sorry you should be disappointed, Mr. Wilbraham,' I said; 'I cannot give you the answer you wish for.'

I spoke with becoming gravity, but endeavoured to throw a faint accent of hesitation into my brief rejoinder. Apparently I succeeded. Mr. Wibraham did not seem to be painfully discouraged.

'I could hardly dare to hope for a distinct definite answer so immediately,' he replied. 'But I would venture to beg you not at once to come to a decision; to consider the point, and let me ask you, at another time, for a positive reply.'

'I think it is hardly fair to let you cherish hopes which I am bound to tell you I do not think it very likely will ever be realised.'

'Will you at least so far aid my judgment on that point as to answer one question. Have I a rival, Miss Dormer?'

He brought out the question rather sharply, and I felt, rather than saw, that he scrutinized my face keenly as he did so. I do not think he gained anything by that move. The way in which he had put the question forbade all thought of his suspecting the truth. I had little doubt that Lord Wichborough's delusion was in his thoughts. That would be a very serious complication for him. It might be that dread, more than suspicion of it, prompted his question.

'I am not sure you have a right to ask such a question,' I said.

'I think I have. The point at issue is, am I to beg you to leave the matter unsettled, and to continue to hope? If I have no rival, that is what I would earnestly entreat you to agree to. But if I have, of course the case is very different.'

'Well, I have no objection to answer. I have not the least idea of marrying at all. My cousin Conrad has always been the best and dearest of brothers to me. I should not like to form any tie which might prevent my devoting to him the time and attention which his uncertain health render of importance to him.'

I caught a faint momentary gleam of satisfaction on his face, and knew he had walked into the snare I had artfully tendered. It must, of course, on reflection, occur to me how exactly that position would be attained, in the best and most fitting manner, by my marrying him.

'Then I shall not cease to hope. Of course I take all responsibility in so doing on myself. I quite understand that you in no way give me any encouragement to do so. I intend leaving here directly, but shortly after Christmas I hope to return. I would beg you to think over what I said, and to rest assured, if you will trust your happiness in my hands, it shall not be my fault if you ever regret having done so. I hope, when I return, it may be to receive a promise of happiness far beyond my deserts ; but not beyond what I hope I may prove myself able to deserve in future. You will promise, will you not ?'

'I will. Whenever you return I will be prepared to give you a definite and final answer.'

He left the Court the next day. A clear two months were gained. By a little judicious diplomacy I had no doubt I could make them three. But what then? A definite answer, and a desperate foe? It was impossible to forecast the course of events. I felt at the moment as powerless to foresee what might happen in three months, as in thirty years. The action for the present moment, and that alone, was clear. To try and keep Colonel L'Estrange's superstitious terrors at fever heat, and Conrad as much as possible out of his way.

I said nothing to Adrian Warren of that interview. I dared not do it. I was in a very different condition, both mentally and physically, from that in which I had been when we had been when we had spoken before of Mr. Wilbraham's suit. But I had had a warning then I was never likely to forget. I was not going to run needless risks.

The few weeks that followed were, I think, taking them all in all, the most anxious and harassing of my whole life. I literally woke every morning in absolute uncertainty what might happen before night. I imagine that in reality Colonel L'Estrange had been

growing worse for some time ; but that concentration of all his thoughts upon Aunt Marion had prevented the fact making itself apparent in his general proceedings. Now his irritability and his animus against his son increased most alarmingly. Poor Conrad ! it taxed my utmost power to play my part of comparative indifference, in face of his calm patience and noble serenity under the most irritating, sometimes even insulting, treatment.

Gradually, however, actual alarm was added to my anxiety. Colonel L'Estrange began occasionally to pass from extreme irritability to a positive violence of temper, which made me tremble for Conrad's personal safety. It seemed to me sometimes, as if he was on the very verge of losing all control over himself.

One very dull, raw November day, when he had worked himself into a state approaching fury over some trifling incident at luncheon, he said to me abruptly, as we rose from table—

'Vera, I think I should like to walk round the park this afternoon. I wish you would go with me.'

The proposition had a mild flavour of insanity. Ever since the severe attack of bronchitis which had nearly ended Colonel L'Estrange's not too valuable life years before, he had always had to be careful about exposure in bad weather. As in duty bound, I entered a protest.

'It is very raw and damp. Do you think it will be safe for you to go out ?'

'My dear, had I not felt certain on that point, I should not have asked you to accompany me.'

A sort of sarcastic politeness was the high water mark of his displeasure towards me. I knew it was worse than useless to say anything more, so I went to prepare for the walk, not attempting to disguise from myself my inward satisfaction that my remonstrance had been unavailing, and my distinct hope that his rashness might bring to an end his ill omened existence. Still, I urged him when I joined him in the hall, to put on a warmer overcoat than he had chosen, and was again met by a sharp and short rebuff.

He walked for some time after we left the house in silence,

but with a restless gait which I knew betokened much mental disturbance. At length he burst out—

'Vera, I really believe Conrad is mentally deficient.'

If he is, I should like to know what you are? was my mental rejoinder; but the position was far too critical for me even to feel angry. I quietly replied—

'I am sure he is not that, Colonel L'Estrange. Men like Lord Wichborough, Mr. Mortimer, and others of the same stamp, would not have the high opinion of his abilities that they have, were that the case. They see him when he is able to show what he really is. It is only the depressing influence of his asthmatic tendency, and the difficulty it causes him in speaking sometimes, that makes him seem stupid to you.'

'Humph! I can't understand such sentiments in a sharp-sighted girl like you. However, one may as well make the best of things. Conrad is quite unfit to manage a large property.'

'I cannot agree with you there either,' I said. 'With the aid of a competent agent, such as Mr. Warren, to save him from injurious exposure, I am sure his high principle and clear sound sense, fit him very well for such a responsibility.'

'I do not believe it,' he replied, with increasing excitement. 'In fact I have begun to entertain serious doubts whether I am justified in placing all the power and influence resulting from the possession of large property in such incompetent hands.'

This was growing very alarming. Of all moral positions, from the highest to the lowest, I believe the most impregnable is that of a selfish egotist, entrenched behind conscientious scruples. I was silent, for I really did not know what to say. After walking on without speaking for a time, Colonel L'Estrange went on.

'I have been thinking much of this since your poor aunt's death. I was always averse to causing her pain. Look here, Vera'

He stopped dead, and faced me, flushed and excited. But for a moment he did not speak.

'You must not allow yourself to grow too eager,' I said,

cautiously choosing my phrases, 'or you will bring on one of your severe headaches.'

'Oh no. I am not in the least excited,' he replied. 'But I want to see if I cannot find a satisfactory way out of this state of matters. You know my dislike to make a will, at least to sign one. I dislike quite as much; in fact I feel it would be wrong to leave that poor'—He checked himself. 'Vera, you profess to love your cousin.'

'It is no profession,' I said. 'I love him dearly.'

'Then marry him, girl, and everything may arrange itself. You have sense and wit enough to manage ten properties. I would rather see my property in your hands than in anyone else's. Besides, I could arrange everything by your marriage settlement, in a way that would prevent all need for my making a will, I am sure of it. I have thought much of this scheme during the last year. It commends itself more and more to me. It covers all difficulties, and will relieve me from great anxiety. Well, why do you look so white and scared?'

'I am not scared,' I replied, 'but you have amazed me. I never dreamed of such an idea having occurred to you. And you talk as if it was all in my hands. I am very sure that Conrad has never thought of such a thing.'

'Conrad can take his choice. What I want to know is, will you marry him? If you will only say that you will, I will give him the option. With you, his whole inheritance shall come to him without reserve, save of a few legacies. If he refuses the terms—well, I must endeavour to overcome my reluctance to making a will, and effect such a settlement of property as I deem it my duty to make. Give me your answer, Vera.'

The situation was critical. Yet in spite of its gravity the ludicrous side of it forced itself upon me. Fickle fortune had surely chosen me as the darling sport of her malicious pranks! At every fresh turn she dangled the very object it was the dearest wish of my life to attain before my eyes, but as a thing only to be grasped by means I could not, or dared not use. Fortunately,

for the moment, my course was clear. The great thing was to gain time.

'That is impossible for me to do, Colonel L'Estrange, all in a moment. I have, all through my life, looked on Conrad so entirely as a brother, that I almost feel as though he were within the forbidden degrees. I cannot, all in a moment, grasp so entirely novel a position.'

'How soon will you give me your answer? It must be soon. This matter is weighing on me very heavily. I feel it is necessary for my health that my mind should be set at rest. Will you promise me your answer in a week or'—

Here a *deus ex machina* intervened in the shape of a sudden fit of coughing. Not till that moment had it occurred to me that Colonel L'Estrange had chosen the spot for his abrupt halt exactly where a cold blast of wind swept persistently across our path. His conscientious scruples suddenly took another turn.

'You were right, Vera, I ought not to have come out. This wretched anxiety makes me forget the due care of my health. My unfortunate son may be the death of his father yet. But he shall not profit by it. It never occurred to him to suggest I had better not go out. I daresay he wished I should. I fear I have caught cold.'

We hurried home, and next day Colonel L'Estrange was confined to his bed with a very satisfactory fit of bronchitis.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WHICH WILL.

I DO not hesitate to admit that I cherished a hope this convenient attack of bronchitis would end for good the painful strain of our position. But it soon became evident that Colonel L'Estrange was beginning to recover. The crisis was delayed, and it was possible we might use the accident as a means to

augment his dread of will-making, the attack having followed so instantly upon his taking the subject into serious consideration. That was all we had gained.

For the moment, at least, he was in a calmer frame of mind, as was always the case when any specific form of illness seized upon him, but that I knew would be but a temporary symptom. All my thoughts were concentrated on the effort to gain time. Our conversation during that eventful walk, while clearly revealing the imminence of the danger, had seemed to me to indicate a mental state which justified a hope that could we but stave off any action for a little longer, Colonel L'Estrange's condition might become such as to effectually prevent him from making any will.

I hailed, therefore, with the greatest satisfaction a suggestion which Dr. Brydges made to me one day, after seeing this patient, that it would be very desirable he should be persuaded to go to the south of Europe for a few weeks, as soon as he was strong enough to bear the journey.

'I have proposed the step to him,' he said, 'and he does not seem averse to it. I suppose you could go with him, Miss Dormer?'

'Certainly. How soon will he be fit to start?'

'Not for another fortnight, I think. But I shall better be able to decide a few days later.'

Magnificent possibilities seemed to be opening before me. I might be able to repeat Aunt Marion's tactics, and keep him abroad through the whole summer. At any rate all thought of will-making would be put off; he and Conrad would be kept apart; and the necessity for my driving Mr. Wilbraham to desperation would be indefinitely postponed. I had advanced step by step into the gloom, and it really now seemed as if the way was growing a little clearer.

The evening before we were to start for the south of France Conrad came to my sitting-room, after we had all retired for the night.

'Are you busy, Vera?' he asked.

'Not at all.'

'I want to talk to you. I saw Warren to-day. My father had been settling business with him, and he asked me to come over. What was my father saying to you that afternoon when he got the chill?'

I felt my colour rise, and I saw he was watching me. I tried to answer carelessly.

'He talked in a very excited way about various things. He was in a very irritable mood.'

Conrad smiled. 'No fencing, dear child,' he said. 'My father, as you know, is always dropping mysterious hints. I had quite sufficiently divined what was in his mind. But I had no suspicion of his having broached the subject to you, until Warren spoke to me about it to-day.'

'Mr. Warren!' I exclaimed, tacitly admitting, in my consternation, the correctness of Conrad's impression. 'Does he know?'

'Of course. My father is as mysteriously confidential with him as with others. When he spoke of important issues depending on your decision regarding a certain point he had submitted to you on the day of his seizure, Warren knew perfectly well what he meant. My dear little sister, why did you not flatly refuse at once? You cannot suppose I would accept such a sacrifice, even were you disposed to make it.'

'I wanted to gain time.'

'Was that all, Vera? You were not striving to nerve yourself for a great sacrifice?'

'No, indeed, Conrad. I could not do that, even to save your inheritance. It would be doing you a cruel wrong. You know I love you dearly, but I cannot do that, because—'

He had sat down near me, and he laid a finger on my lips.

'Hush, dear,' he said, 'no more. Wichborough and I have often discussed who it can be? I only feared that your inability to sacrifice yourself might be causing you pain and distress. But believe me, dear Vera, I would not accept the sacrifice even were you able and willing to make it. It is not only that I would

not tie a bright young life like yours to that of a semi-invalid. I do not intend to marry at all. I do not hold myself justified in marrying, for fear of the chance of such a strongly developed asthmatic tendency as mine proving an inheritance. Nothing would induce me to run the risk of handing on so much suffering as I have at times to endure. I know I shall always have a loving sister to care for me. That is enough for me. If my father disinherits me, I have at least my mother's fortune, and you will give me a home, and all of woman's love that may ever be mine.'

He spoke with such intense sadness of tone that my tears fell in spite of myself.

'Nay, dear child, do not distress yourself. I really wish you and Warren would give up this miserable struggle, and let my father please himself.'

'Never, Conrad. That I will never do so long as there is a possibility we may thwart his purpose. You are making yourself out far more of an invalid than you really are. There is no man more fit to hold a large property, and to hold it for the good of others, rather than of himself. It is not only for you we are fighting, but for every one who will be the gainer by your possessing wealth, the loser by your rightful inheritance falling into the hands of a ruined gambler.'

'Yes, I believe you are right there, but I am weary of the wretched business. It will soon be over now, however. You have fought bravely, dear child, and I will not, at present at least, thwart your purpose, as I had almost resolved to do, by telling my father I could not fall in with his views. But I think when you return, and he must have his answer, the end will soon come. He grows more and more bitter against me, and Wilbraham, I doubt not, keeps up the supply of gall. Now good-night, dear Vera. I am glad to find this mad scheme is not causing you any fresh pain and anxiety. You have borne all too much already in your efforts to prop the tottering fortunes of our house. But you are right. It is not for me alone you are fighting. The property, in Wilbraham's hands, would be put to

the worst of uses. After me it would pass to my cousin, Laurence L'Estrange, as fine a fellow as lives. You are not spending your life for the restricted end of serving a relative, but to secure benefits extending far beyond the duration of either your life or mine.'

With that curious echo of my dying father's words he left me, and the following day Colonel L'Estrange and I crossed the Channel, to begin a life of, for me at least, weary wandering from one place to another, along the shores of the Mediterranean, according as Colonel L'Estrange's fitsful restlessness inclined him alternately to long for and tire of each in succession. I did not care to ask myself if the feeling of lonely sadness which often stole over me was due solely to an uncongenial life.

In spite of all the gravity of the situation its grim comicality forced me at times to laugh. Colonel L'Estrange, growing more irritable as his general health improved, kept worrying me to come to a decision, which I as persistently insisted I would not do until we returned to England. Gilbert Wilbraham, meanwhile, was writing pathetic letters to me, deplored this unlucky postponement of his visit to the Court, bewailing the racking anxiety which tortured his loving heart, and pleading for some word of encouragement. If half his ingenuity in mendacity had been devoted to some honest purpose, I am sure he would have had no need, in middle life, to be fawning at the feet of a young heiress, or seeking to mend his fortunes by sheer robbery.

My diplomacy did not avail to keep Colonel L'Estrange abroad longer than the middle of April. Then no vivid pictures of the rigours of an English spring would turn him from a sudden whim to go home at once. So with heavy forebodings of what was coming I prepared for the journey.

We landed at Dover towards the end of April, and it was cold enough to have killed him three times over, had the preservation of his life been of the least consequence. As it was, he seemed to have become weather-proof, and he arrived at the Court in apparently excellent general health. For about a week he was so ominously quiet that I felt it could only be the calm before

the storm, and kept the closest possible watch on all his movements. The thought of those two possibly existent wills hung like a dead weight upon me.

One evening, about a week after we reached home, he asked me to accompany him to the library for a few minutes as he wished to speak to me. With a beating heart I obeyed. His manner was more short and abrupt than it was wont to be to me.

'You do not seem to be in a hurry to answer the question about which you know I am so anxious, Vera,' he said, as he seated himself by the fire.

'You could not expect me to take the initiative in introducing it,' I replied. I felt strangely cool and collected now that the momentous hour was come.

'Well, no, perhaps not. But now I have introduced it, and I want your answer.'

'There is another point to be settled first, Colonel L'Estrange. You have not given me any sort of assurance that you are entitled to act for Conrad in this matter. You must surely see that in asking me to declare my sentiments you are placing me in a very false position, unless, at the same time, you can assure me as to Conrad's wishes.'

I think he was slightly taken aback, and I suppose he thought my words showed a disposition to treat. He reflected in silence for a few moments. 'There is something in that,' he said, 'but I confess I have never been able to bring myself to the belief that your acquiescence in my views would mean more than a readiness to fall in with a desirable family arrangement. I cannot imagine there would be much of what is generally called love in question. Taking this view, I have thought it better, before speaking to Conrad, to place myself in a position to assure him that I had good reason to think there would be no difficulty if he chose to agree. Of course, beyond that bare assertion, I consider our communications quite confidential. I have thought much, I may almost incessantly, over this matter, and I have taken my resolution. I wish to explain it to you to-night, and to receive your positive answer to-morrow.'

That was something gained. 'I am quite ready to listen,' I replied.

'Of course,' he went on, 'I am aware our opinions about my son differ. You have known him all your life, and have formed your own judgment, and that judgment seems to me to be such as to render it possible you might feel not disinclined to become his wife. Had you regarded him from my point of view, I could not have made such a proposal. I have resolved, as a matter of duty, always, I hope, a paramount consideration with me, to overcome my reluctance to make a settlement of my affairs. If you will assure me you are willing to become Conrad's wife, I will speak to him on the subject, and if he chooses to fall in with my views, he shall, at all events, be given a life interest in the whole of my property. I may attach conditions about future devolution. If he refuses to meet my wishes—well, we need not discuss that point. He must, of course, be provided for, but I hold it a duty not to allow a valuable property to fall into the hands of a weak invalid, certain, in my opinion, sooner or later, to become the prey of fortune-hunters. Now, you understand. I shall expect your answer to-morrow.'

'You shall have it.'

'Then I need detain you from your rest no longer, my dear. You look tired. Good night.'

Tired I was not, but pale, I dare say, I was. His whole bearing alarmed me greatly. There was a calmness and concentration of purpose about him very unlike the usual desultory irritability of his excited moods. I felt as certain that my answer on the morrow meant hopeless defeat in the long battle which had gone on since my childhood, as I did that my other answer was out of the question. I found Conrad in my sitting-room.

'What is it, dear Vera?' he asked. 'You must not be left to carry on this painful struggle alone.'

I was far too anxious and alarmed for any diffidence, and I told him exactly what had passed.

'What a monstrous suggestion!' he said, 'holding me what

he does, to propose to any young girl to become my wife. Well, it will soon be over now. It will cost me a pang to see the property which has been in our family for centuries pass into the hands of a worthless intriguer, but the sting of these things is in the manner of regarding them, so it rests with ourselves to extract it. But I wish, Vera, you would send Jackson early to the Manor with a note asking Warren to come in the evening, prepared to remain if necessary. I feel very uneasy about my father. I will think over what you have told me, and try to decide what it is best to do.'

'I must give my answer to-morrow, remember.'

'Yes; unless we can see a way to avoid the interview altogether.'

I doubt if Conrad had more sleep that night than I had. The very crisis of our fate was upon us, with such a total change in the distempered fancies of Colonel L'Estrange's diseased brain, that there seemed no possibility of staving off the inevitable disaster for even a few hours.

A sorry trio we made at breakfast the next morning. Colonel L'Estrange's stern, silent gloom was a far more depressing temperament than his ordinary mood of snappish irritability. Luckily the postbag came in rather earlier than usual, and relieved the situation a little.

'I should like to see you in the library, about twelve o'clock, Vera,' Colonel L'Estrange said, as he rose to leave the table.
'Will that suit you, my dear?'

'Certainly,' I replied. 'I will come.'

Conrad left the room without speaking, and I went up to my sitting-room to meditate over the position of affairs. Was there the faintest hope that in any way I could stave off the impending disaster? Any way in which I could frame my answer that might induce Colonel L'Estrange to pause for even a few days? I felt so convinced that some sort of illness was hanging over him that I clung to the hope that a delay of even a few days might yet save the situation.

No inspiration would come. He was clearly bent on a de-

cided answer, and I began to grow horribly nervous as the clock relentlessly chimed quarter after quarter. Half-past eleven had just struck when I heard a door slam heavily, and then a hasty step on the stairs. In a moment the door opened, and Conrad came in abruptly, very pale and terribly agitated.

I started up in terror, but he signed to me to keep quiet, and drawing a chair close to the fire sat down and rested his forehead on his hands. I understood him, and waited quietly for him to speak.

'It is over, dear Vera,' he said at length.

'What is over?'

'Everything. There is no need for you to go to my father.'

'How so?'

'I did not intend you should bear the brunt of everything. I made up my mind what to do last night. I went to my father just now, and told him that from various things he had said to me I had divined what his wishes were, and that I feared he had the intention of speaking to you on the subject. I begged him to do nothing of the kind, as he would only place you in a false position by so doing. I could not consent to consider any such proposal. I told him that I had a rooted objection to marriages with so great a disparity in age, and that for other reasons, also, I could be no party to any such arrangement.'

'And he?'

Conrad shook his head. 'Do not ask. It was most painful. He is my father. I would fain forget what passed.'

'Oh, Conrad,' I exclaimed, 'you should not have done it. You should have left it to me.'

'Make a woman's courage the shield of my cowardice, Vera. Is that your advice? No, dear, you have already borne too much. The struggle is over now. I am convinced that the bitterness of his resentment will master all his superstitious terrors. I would wager a good deal he will make his will within forty-eight hours.'

Sign it within six hours, in the white-heat of his anger, I thought to myself, but I said nothing. Conrad knew nothing of

the two wills. He took my hand, and drawing me to him, kissed my cheek.

'Do not fret, dear child. When an evil is unavoidable, not to think of it is the only resource. How many thousands in this world have lost more heavily than I shall do. We must brace ourselves to meet the inevitable. At least I am spared anxiety about my mother.'

'You will not come to luncheon?'

'Yes, certainly. I shall not leave you alone with my father. I am much alarmed. I wish I had asked Warren to come earlier.'

Luncheon was ominous from its perfect harmony. Colonel L'Estrange was a little flushed, and there was a look in his eye which made me shudder. I expected every moment to see him start up and attack Conrad. But he seemed only absent and preoccupied, and the few remarks he made on common-place subjects were easy and careless. He took not the slightest notice of my failure to keep my appointment.

All that afternoon I watched and listened, but, as far as I could make out, Colonel L'Estrange remained alone in the library. I went, at last, to my room, to dress for dinner, with a very distinct consciousness that the strain and tension were more than it would be possible to endure for very long. Just as I was crossing the corridor to go down stairs to the drawing-room, I heard a door open, which I felt sure was that of the library. It was very dark in the hall, but I distinctly made out that two men came out of the room and went towards the servants' quarters. One, I was certain, was the butler, about the other I could not be so sure, but I felt a strong conviction that it was the head gardener.

I went back to my room for a few moments. So all was over! The hopes and fears of some twelve years were at an end. I never knew until that cruel moment how strong my hopes had been, and I think if Gilbert Wilbraham had been beside me then I could have murdered him without a moment's hesitation.

The sound of the gong forced me to try and master all outward signs of agitation, so as to appear in the drawing-room

wearing as much as possible my usual manner. Colonel L'Estrange did not join us until just after dinner had been announced. He was less composed than at luncheon, and I thought his face wore an expression of fiendish triumph. His conduct to his son, during dinner, surpassed anything I had ever seen. His sneers and covert insults were almost beyond endurance, and Conrad's noble serenity, and unconquerable patience in answering, if forced to do so, with perfect courtesy, and quiet deference of manner, seemed only to increase his sullen fury.

At length the servants left the room. Then Colonel L'Estrange turning to Conrad with a withering sneer, pointedly put some question to him about the property, his answer to which could only be given on the assumption that he would succeed his father. I saw my cousin flush, but he replied calmly.

'I think, sir, it will be quite time enough to consider that point when it appears that there is any need for me to do so.'

The quiet dignity of his answer seemed to act like a match to gunpowder. Colonel L'Estrange burst into a torrent of vituperation and abuse, mingled with fearful imprecations. I sat petrified. Conrad turned very white, but he only said quietly to me—

'Go away, dear Vera.'

The words appeared to carry his father fairly beyond all power of restraint. With almost a yell he started up and seized a decanter. Before I had time even to resolve whether to interpose between them or rush to the bell, I saw him stagger. He dropped the decanter, fell back in his chair, and then rolled on to the floor.

Startled by the noise, the men servants rushed in. Colonel L'Estrange was lifted up, carried to his room, and laid on the bed, breathing heavily, but quite unconscious.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BRIGHTENING PROSPECTS.

'THE case is quite hopeless, though it is not possible to say how long he may linger. I think it very unlikely that he will regain consciousness.'

Such was Dr. Brydges's report to us, after seeing Colonel L'Estrange. Adrian Warren entered the drawing-room as he was speaking. Conrad hastily explained to him what had happened, and then he and Dr. Brydges left the room together. Adrian turned an anxious look on me.

'I fear the worst,' was all I could say; and then I told him, as far as was needful, what had happened in the earlier part of the day, and of my observations before dinner. He was very pale, and his face grew almost fierce in expression as he listened.

'It leaves very little room for hope,' he said.

'But, Conrad,' I replied, 'he must believe the danger over. Should we not warn him?'

'Not just yet, I think. There will be time enough for that later. He has evidently had a terrible shock. We had better leave him a little time to get over it.'

'Yes, indeed. It was horrible! It is dreadful to think those awful words will be the last Conrad will ever hear his father speak. If the will is signed, the prediction is strangely fulfilled.'

Conrad came back at the moment.

'I am very glad you have come, Warren,' he said. 'You will remain?'

'Certainly.'

'This has shaken me fearfully,' he continued, seating himself in an easy chair. 'I am fit for nothing. This brave little cousin of mine has borne far too much already. I shall be glad to know there is some one a little stronger than I am at hand to help her now.'

'Miss Dormer seems to me to be quite above all need for

help from anyone. But I shall be very glad if I can be of any service.'

By the cold constraint of his tone I knew how strong was the feeling that lay beneath. We sat for some time in the drawing-room, talking over various arrangements, and many a slight, but perceptible, sign showed me that Adrian Warren winced, as I did, when Conrad incidentally betrayed, by some casual remark, an undisturbed conviction that he was speaking as master of everything.

The long hours of the night passed away without any visible change in the sufferer; but when Dr. Brydges came, early in the morning, he pronounced him to be certainly weaker, and expressed his doubts whether he would live through another night. The day seemed to drag along even more slowly than the night had done—that pause of silent inaction, during which Adrian Warren and I, at least, awaited the bursting of the storm.

I think I prayed that Colonel L'Estrange might not outlive the day. His seizure had taken place after the post was gone the previous evening, and Parsons would hardly dare to telegraph. But I had not the least doubt a letter would go to Gilbert Wilbraham that afternoon, and that on some excuse or other he would arrive the next day. The presence of that subtle, crafty schemer, before Conrad was put upon his guard, would be an almost insupportable addition to our perplexities. If we could only send a message, before the telegraph office closed, that Colonel L'Estrange was dead, he would have no excuse for coming instantly.

So I felt unalloyed satisfaction when, about half-past five, Baxter summoned us hastily to Colonel L'Estrange's bed-side. A sudden change told even my inexperience that the end was near. Within half an hour the unconscious cause of so much trouble and sorrow had ceased to have any further power, either for good or evil, upon the lives of his fellow-creatures. The Cathedral clock was just chiming a quarter-past six, when I

slipped down the stairs and despatched a groom to telegraph to Gilbert Wilbraham that his uncle was dead.

I went back to my own sitting-room, and there Conrad soon joined me. He appeared far more distressed than I could understand. He was not a man to assume an unfelt sentiment because it was the conventionally fitting one. I had expected from him only subdued gravity.

'Oh, Vera,' he said at last, 'the sight of my father's dead face has rendered tenfold sharper the sting of that last dreadful scene. It has brought the happy past and the wretched present so sharply together.'

'How, dear?' I asked.

'Years ago, long before you were born, I was my father's idol. As a little boy I was a remarkably fine child, and he seemed to dote upon me. He always took me about with him everywhere, and hardly seemed happy if I was not with him. Of course I loved him dearly. His face, now, is so like the face of those old happy days, I could almost fancy myself a child again, delighting in nothing so much as being with him. That time and the present seem to be side by side now, with all the pain and sorrow of all the long years of gradual change set up as a sharp dividing line between them.'

'It is unutterably sad,' I said. 'But you know that it was due to disease.'

'Yes, I fully believe that; and I am thankful my last remembrance of his face will be what it is. But I am terribly shaken. Has anyone been in the library to-day?'

'No. I locked the door last night, immediately after dinner, not knowing what papers or letters might be lying about.'

'Quite right, dear. It was well thought of. Go presently and see that everything is put away. Then give orders for fire and lamps to be lighted this evening. I think my father's cabinet should be examined. He may have left directions about his funeral, or about other things, which we should see at once. I cannot do it. I feel too ill and confused. I will ask Warren to do it after dinner.'

Never was determination more welcome. Now, the immediate control of the development of circumstances would be entirely in the hands of Adrian and myself. I found everything in order in the library. A few circulars and unimportant letters were lying on the writing table, but the cabinet in which Colonel L'Estrange kept all his business papers, and the drawers of the table, were all locked as usual. I sent for Parsons and gave the necessary orders. Then I went in search of Adrian Warren, to prepare him for Conrad's mission.

'Now you will be able to ascertain all we want to know about the will,' I said.

He shook his head. 'I fear that is not likely. Probably he may have sent it at once to his lawyer. If not, it will most likely be sealed up.'

'I do not think it is gone to the lawyer. He would need to write, and the time was short. If it is sealed up, you must open and examine it.'

'Impossible, Miss Dormer!' he exclaimed, in a startled tone. 'I dare not do that.'

'Yes, Adrian,' I said, involuntarily, in my eagerness, using his Christian name, 'you can and must do it, for Conrad's sake. You will not expose him to the bitterness, the mortification, of finding, when the will is opened in public, that that wily traitor has, after all, been successful. If it is so, let him at least be warned beforehand. If you find a will, open and read it. If necessary, you can seal it up again. I will take all the responsibility of your doing it on myself.'

'But not the responsibility of doing it yourself,' he said, rather bitterly.

'I would do it in a moment, were there no one else more fitting. But Colonel L'Estrange was very partial to me. It would be invidious for me to interfere with a will in which I may have an interest. No such objection applies to you, to whom, personally, the matter is perfectly immaterial.'

Still he hesitated. 'You are straining at a gnat,' I vehemently urged. 'If the will we dread has been signed, an act of

monstrous injustice has been perpetrated. That we cannot hinder, but by a mere technical breach of confidence you can prevent bitter mortification being added to a cruel wrong. Do not hesitate for a moment.'

Before he had time to reply, Conrad entered the room; but I thought the look he gave me meant that my entreaties had overcome his scruples.

It was nearly nine o'clock when he went to the library to execute Conrad's commission. Conrad stayed for some time talking to me in the drawingroom, and, even more than on the previous day, with a quiet assumption of ownership, while, perhaps, at that very moment, Adrian Warren might be reading the will which would reduce him to the ignominious position of a mere annuitant.

Conrad retired for the night soon after ten o'clock. Then I sat alone, almost, it seemed to me, like a criminal awaiting his doom. The only faint hope I could indulge was that perhaps the will might not be quite so bad as our fears led us to picture it. Eleven struck, still there was no sound from the library. Presently the butler looked in.

'You need not sit up, Cox,' I said. 'Bring bedroom candles here, and you can take the hall lamp. Mr. Warren is occupied for Mr. L'Estrange in the library. I will wait till he has finished, and then put out the lamps.'

Cox disappeared, and then dead silence fell upon the house. The ticking of clocks, and the regular chime from the Cathedral tower, were the only sounds that broke the stillness. Twelve o'clock struck, and I was beginning to feel nervous and overstrung. Surely Mr. Warren had had ample time for his examination! Did his prolonged absence mean that he had lighted upon a will of such appalling iniquity that he had not the courage to come and proclaim it? I found myself almost trying not to breathe, in my intense eagerness to catch the faintest sound. At last, soon after twelve, I heard the library door open, and Adrian's footsteps hastily crossing the hall. I did not need to be told

he was agitated, and I felt as if I must choke. He entered abruptly, pale and evidently excited.

'It is all right,' he said, with a deep sort of gasp of relief, as he caught the look which was the only question I had power to put. He sat down, and pressed his hand upon his eyes for a moment. Then he went on :

'I had hardly courage to look when I found it. My hands trembled so much I could hardly hold the paper. But it is all right.' He rose again as he spoke, and crossing to the side table, poured out and drank a glass of sherry. I sat in a sort of strange bewilderment. What could it mean ?

'Had you to break the seal?' I asked.

'No, I am glad to say,' he replied, returning to his seat. 'It was this way. There are a heap of papers in the cabinet, but none of consequence. I was working through them when I noticed there was a sort of inner recess, with a door locked. I found the key, and opened it. The will was there, in an envelope, but unsealed, addressed to his lawyer. With it was a letter, dated yesterday, beginning "My dear sir, I herewith forward—." There was no more. I suppose he had intended sending the will off by post yesterday, and had found he had not time to finish the letter, so had locked them both up, to be despatched to-day. The will is witnessed, as you supposed, by the butler and head gardener.'

'Then I have no doubt you are right. He might have written a short letter between the time of their leaving the room and his coming to the drawing-room. But doubtless the gong interrupted him, and he put the letter aside. And it is really all right?'

'Yes. Everything goes unconditionally to Mr. L'Estrange, save only a few legacies. Wilbraham gets a handsome one.'

'Is the other will there?'

'No.'

'And the will is in favour of Conrad, and only signed yesterday,' I repeated slowly. 'Mr. Warren, he never intended that. He has signed the wrong one by mistake.'

'Say, signed the right one by mistake,' he replied. 'The

right one it clearly is, whether it be the one he intended or not. It is the only one that could have any moral right to stand,' he added vehemently. 'But, Miss Dormer, you will be wise to keep silence on the subject. We have a desperate and unscrupulous enemy to meet, who may possibly have his own reasons for being of your opinion. Do not allow yourself to be betrayed into manifesting the least surprise, or any impression that the transaction is any way different from what might have been expected. And now I think you should retire. You look very worn.'

As I wished him good night, he held my hand for a moment, and looked at me with a strange wistful look. 'It is of you I think the most,' he said, 'after all. Of your long toil and unselfish devotion. Thank God you are spared the cruel disappointment of failure.'

'Successful by a mere accident,' I replied. That was the thought which had been in my mind during our conversation. 'It is but lost labour that ye haste to rise up early, and so late take rest, and eat the bread of carefulness.' We had not won in that long struggle. We had been absolutely, utterly defeated. Colonel L'Estrange had never voluntarily signed that will which Adrian Warren had found. Mental confusion, resulting from the impending seizure, must have led to this strange accident.

'Successful at any rate. That is enough,' he replied rather abruptly, and we parted.

So all was over, and Conrad L'Estrange was safely in possession of the heritage of his ancestors! Perhaps, after all, I was wrong in saying we had been utterly defeated; for had not the line of action we had followed been the cause of the excitement which seemed to me to be the only possible cause of the strange and fortunate blunder Colonel L'Estrange had evidently made? How lucky he had not had time to finish a letter which might have revealed the fact that there had been a blunder committed! Still my mind was not at rest. I could not feel the relief and satisfaction the circumstances seemed to justify. A vague dread would come stealing over me that, perhaps, we were not yet

quite at the end of the tangle. Suppose it should be that there was evidence, somewhere, that the will was not what Colonel L'Estrange had intended to make. Could such evidence be used against one signed so recently, in the presence of such creditable witnesses? I was far too ignorant on all questions of law to have the faintest idea of what might happen. Law had always seemed to me to be a strange system, full of pitfalls for the unwary, and surprises for the uninitiated. Perhaps for the very reason that my knowledge was vague, my fears were troublesome.

Of course, I told Conrad the next morning that Mr. Warren had found a will, and at my instigation had glanced over it, that we might be prepared for all contingencies.

'A will in my favour, Vera,' he said, 'signed just after our painful interview? It must be a mistake.'

'It is not, indeed,' I replied. 'Mr. Warren was as surprised as you are. He said when he found it, he could hardly summon courage to look at it. Perhaps your father's lawyer may know something about it. Did you ask him if he knew of a will?'

'No. I made so sure there was none, I never thought of mentioning such a thing. I cannot understand it. Where is Warren?'

'Gone. He sent me word by Murray this morning that he would not wait for breakfast, as he expected letters would be at the Manor which would need attention. He will call in the afternoon.'

The post next morning brought a letter from Mr. Sedley, Colonel L'Estrange's lawyer, which did not tend to clear up the mystery. He supposed there was no will, as he knew of none, so Mr. L'Estrange would succeed as heir-at-law. He would be down in time for the funeral.

The evening of the next day brought Gilbert Wilbraham, and he had not been in the house ten minutes before I felt very certain he had no suspicion of the thunderbolt that was in store for him. His demeanour was perfectly suited to the occasion. He was the last man in the world likely to fail in outward pro-

priety of conduct. But the under-current of triumphant exultation was very perceptible, at least to me, especially in the malicious gleam which, more than once, the marked coolness of my cousin's manner brought into his eyes.

'This has been fearfully sudden, Miss Dormer,' he said to me, the first moment we were alone. 'I cannot tell you how much your telegram shocked and startled me. Had my uncle shown any symptoms of illness?'

'None at all,' I replied, carefully weighing every word. 'On the contrary, I had thought he seemed in very good health since his return from abroad.'

'And on the day of the seizure, had you no warning?'

'None. Colonel L'Estrange seemed a little silent and pre-occupied at luncheon; that was all. A sudden burst of excitement, caused by my cousin expressing, at dinner, an opinion in which he did not agree, led to the fatal attack.'

I saw he looked puzzled, but he said nothing more. I did not bestow much attention on him. That necessity was happily past. I had by no means forgotten the promise I had made when we parted, but there was no need to give any thought to that subject at present. He was too much a man of the world to let it appear, under the circumstances of the moment, that he had any remembrance of the position in which we stood. After the will was read we should see what would happen. I saw very little of him, but I believe he spent his time chiefly in prowling about the place, taking stock, I suppose, of his new possessions; and I know that he wrote a great many letters.

The day of the funeral came at last, with all the gloomy horrors which in those days marked funerals of any importance. Lawrence L'Estrange, who was the son of a cousin of Colonel L'Estrange's, and one or two other distant relations on the L'Estrange side of the house, all total strangers to me, arrived in the morning, so the solemn gloom was broken by a sort of subdued bustle. Shortly before the time of starting, Adrian Warren asked to see me. I thought he looked very worn and anxious, and a boding instantly seized upon me that he had

chanced upon some information tending to indicate that there were breakers ahead.

'Oh, no,' he said, when I expressed my fears, 'though, I admit, I cannot feel quite easy until it appears how Mr. Wilbraham takes the surprise in store for him. I merely wanted to speak to you about a little matter of business, as I do not like to disturb Mr. L'Estrange. He asked me to return here after the funeral, but this morning I received this letter from Buckton, which I want you to give to him on a convenient opportunity. He will see that the matter to which it refers involves a point of law. I understand Mr. Sedley does not leave until to-morrow, at mid-day. If I go straight to Buckton after the funeral, I can examine into the matter, and get Mr. Sedley's opinion before he leaves. So Mr. L'Estrange will understand my absence.'

Shortly after, the solemn train, with its trailing velvet and nodding plumes, set out, and I was left to my own meditations in the silent house which must soon cease to be my home. I knew that my resolution that it should no longer be my home would be a painful surprise to Conrad, but I could not, I dared not allow that fact to influence me. My presence was no longer necessary to guard his interests. If I stayed now, I stayed because I had not the courage to go; stayed that I might be near Adrian Warren; stayed in spite of the warnings I had had that the position was not without danger; in spite of my own full consciousness that temptation risked for the sake of another is a very different thing from temptation risked out of mere moral weakness. Nor was that all. Love, as he and I understood it, could never exist between Adrian Warren and his wife; but were all communication between him and me absolutely cut off, it was not impossible that, as years rolled on, the mellowing influence of time, community of interest, and the constant association of wedded life might result in the gradual growth of a placid affection, to shed a calm peaceful light over their declining years. To go, meant to cast myself adrift upon a world in which I might be envied, courted, flattered, for I was young and rich, but in which I should live a lonely, heart-hungry

woman. To remain, meant to show weakness, to be unworthy of the love of Adrian Warren. There was no room for doubt or hesitation. But I think in that hour of silent reflection, I grasped more clearly than I had ever before done, what a long dreary road is the road of life, when you set out upon it with all that may brighten the journey left resolutely behind.

CHAPTER XXV.

A BOLT OUT OF THE BLUE.

I WAS roused from my sombre musings by the sound of returning wheels, and in a short time we were assembled in the library. Gilbert Wilbraham was very pale, but there was a hectic flush on each cheek, and I saw, when he chanced to lift a paper which was lying near him, that his hand was very unsteady.

Mr. Sedley seated himself at the table with a business-like air, and put on his spectacles. Conrad unlocked the cabinet, and handed to him the large envelope addressed to himself, and the unfinished letter lying beside it.

'We were none of us aware,' he said, as he took up the envelope, and looked at the address, 'that the late Colonel L'Estrange had made any will. I understand that Mr. L'Estrange himself had no suspicion of the circumstance. To me it is a great surprise, as Colonel L'Estrange had for some time not mentioned the subject to me. This unfinished letter, which was evidently to have been forwarded to me with the will, would, doubtless, have explained his reasons for his somewhat unusual course of conduct. Now we are left to conjecture. My client was rather eccentric in his business arrangements. The will is, I see, dated on the very day of the sudden attack, and the signature was witnessed by Richard Cox, butler, and Andrew Simpson, head gardener, at Wichborough Court. Shall I proceed at once to read the will, Mr. L'Estrange?'

Conrad made a sign of assent, and Mr. Sedley at once plunged

into a bewildering wilderness of 'whereases' and 'wherfores.' The purport of the will was, however, easy enough to grasp. Gilbert Wilbraham had a handsome legacy, and there were a few others. The bulk of the property, of every description, was absolutely and without any conditions left to Conrad.

Long before Mr. Sedley had finished reading, however, I had lost all perception of what he was saying. My whole attention was concentrated on Gilbert Wilbraham. The first few sentences had brought a startled look to his face, and as the lawyer read on, I think nearly every evil passion which could be expressed by a human countenance was depicted on his. I saw, however, that he made a great effort at self mastery, when he saw the reading was drawing to a close. But he was very white, and his lips were trembling.

'A very sensible, creditable will,' the lawyer said, as he laid it down, 'and a very well drawn one, whoever drew it. It was not done by our house. I congratulate you, Mr. L'Estrange. I confess I felt rather anxious when I heard there was a will. Your late father was not by any means an unlikely man to have confused his wishes somewhat. I am very glad everything is so satisfactory.'

'I am sorry to cast any shadow on your satisfaction, Mr. Sedley,' said Gilbert Wilbraham, in a dry harsh voice, which he vainly strove to render perfectly steady, 'but I fear things are not quite in such excellent train as you imagine. That my late uncle signed a will, within a very short time before his very sudden seizure, there is no doubt. But that is not the will he signed.'

A dead silence followed this startling assertion. For a moment everyone was too much amazed to speak. Mr. Sedley was not, I imagine, at all intimately acquainted with Gilbert Wilbraham. He recovered himself first.

'At any rate,' he said, with a laugh, 'it is one that you have no occasion to be discontented with, Mr. Wilbraham. But your assertion is, I think, a very rash one.'

'It is one, sir, which I am prepared to make good, as far as is

possible, under the peculiar circumstances of the case. You are not aware of all my late uncle's proceedings on that fatal afternoon. He not only signed a will, but he wrote and posted a letter to me.'

'Ah!' said the lawyer. My very heart seemed to stand still.

'Yes. And that letter I purpose asking you to read. But first, in order to make the position quite clear, it is necessary that I should explain a little. All the assembled party are, I think, aware that the slight disparity in age between my late uncle and myself rendered our relations much more those of an elder and younger brother, than of uncle and nephew. I was thoroughly in my uncle's confidence, more so with regard to some subjects occasioning him grave anxiety than, I imagine, anyone else. It is enough to say that for many years the disposition of his property had been a cause of much perplexity and worry to my uncle. He was strongly of opinion that my cousin's uncertain health rendered him unfit for the management of a large property, and being a most conscientious man—'

Here Conrad, who had been listening with his elbow resting on the table, and his hand shading his eyes, looked up suddenly, and turned on Gilbert a glance of calm, lofty scorn. 'Enough of that, Wilbraham. Keep to facts. My father's motives are of no present consequence.'

Mr. Wilbraham reddened, and seemed for a moment thoroughly disconcerted. The lawyer glanced rapidly from one to the other, but said nothing.

'I—I mean, then, that to this fact was due part of his perplexity,' continued the wily speaker after a moment's hesitation, 'part to an unfortunate superstitious dread on the subject of signing a will. I had many discussions with my uncle on this question, and I believe knew his wishes and fears better than anyone else. At different times he submitted to me more than one sketch of what he considered a suitable disposition of his property; but I am not aware that he ever finally made up his mind until the day prior to his death. I had not heard from him since his return to England. But on the morning of the

day he died, at the very moment when he must have been lying insensible, I received this letter. If you, Mr. Sedley, will read it aloud I think all present will see I have good cause for saying the will you have read cannot be that which my uncle signed.'

Mr. Sedley took the letter, and glanced at Conrad.

'By all means read it,' he said.

It ran as follows :—

'My DEAR GILBERT,—

'I have only time for a few lines. Matters here have reached a point which has almost forced me to set aside my dread of signing a will. I had a scheme in view which would have met all difficulties, but in it my unhappy son absolutely refuses to concur. I have therefore no choice. I think I mentioned to you, before the death of my dear wife, that I had had two wills drawn up. I have this moment signed one. It is not exactly identical with, but is drawn much on the lines of the last one we discussed. I shall, if I have time to put it up, send it on this evening to Sedley. If not, it will go to-morrow. The other will I mean to keep in my cabinet, that my son may some day know what my intentions were, had he chosen to fall in with my views. You had better come as soon as possible that we may discuss the subject at length.'

'Faithfully yours,

'EDWARD L'ESTRANGE.

Mr. Sedley laid down the letter. I think he was a little puzzled. He did not know enough to read clearly between the lines.

'Well, Mr. Wilbraham,' he said, 'as far as I can see, there is nothing in that letter to indicate that the will before us is not the one Colonel L'Estrange signed.'

'Firstly, then, sir, that will has not the most remote resemblance to the one on the lines of which he says it was drawn. Secondly, it has all the appearance of being such a one as he would have signed had my cousin fallen in with his views; and thirdly, where is that will which he says he left unsigned?'

Again the lawyer looked at Conrad. 'Have all Colonel L'Estrange's papers been examined?' he asked.

'Yes, but not by me. Mr. Warren, at my request, looked through my father's cabinet on the evening of his death in search of any possible directions about his funeral. I had retired before he completed his examination, but on returning the keys to my cousin, Miss Dormer, he told her there was a will. We had been quite under the impression my father had made none.'

'And no one else has been in the room?'

'No one. Miss Dormer had, with quick thoughtfulness, locked the door immediately after my father's sudden seizure. It was unlocked by her in the evening before the cabinet was examined, and all the keys have since been in her possession.'

'And no second will was forthcoming?'

'Certainly not, or Mr. Warren would have found it. He searched all the papers to see if there were any memoranda of my father's wishes on any subject.'

Mr. Sedley turned to Gilbert. 'Well, Mr. Wilbraham,' he said. 'I think you must see there is no use in pursuing this question. The recent date of this will gives no room for a history. You cannot raise a question about its validity because it does not agree with what a private and merely generally expressed letter had led you to anticipate.'

'How do you explain the circumstances, sir?'

'I do not attempt to explain them. I have no means of doing so. I simply point out to you the uselessness of raising any discussion. Granting, for a moment, that you could prove this not to be Colonel L'Estrange's will, what difference would it make, seeing that it virtually leaves everything to the heir-at-law? The only sufferers might be the legatees, of whom you are, yourself, the largest. They would then be quite at Mr. L'Estrange's mercy.'

I thought Gilbert winced, and I felt puzzled. Had rage and mortification really, for the moment, mastered his cool cunning? It was not until a little later I began to see what was his game.

'I have too deep an affection for my late uncle to feel inclined

to submit tamely to the success of a plot for setting aside his last wishes, whatever the result may be.'

'You are going too far, sir,' said Mr. Sedley, sternly. But Conrad interposed.

'Mr. Wilbraham simply means, Mr. Sedley, that I have forged this will, and destroyed the other.'

'I never hinted such a thing, L'Estrange.'

'No, my dear fellow, so I have put it fairly in words for you, to save all further trouble. Thus the decks are cleared for action. We will have in the witnesses and question them. Meanwhile, Mr. Sedley, examine the cabinet if you please, and see if there is a trace of any other will. Warren might have overlooked it.'

He handed the keys to the lawyer, and rang the bell.

'Tell Cox,' he said to the footman who appeared, 'that he and Simpson are both wanted here. Ask him to send a message to Simpson to come at once.'

During the brief delay that followed, Mr. Sedley rapidly turned over the papers. There was no sign of any other will, signed or unsigned. He had just concluded his fruitless search when the witnesses entered.

'Mr. Sedley, will you put such questions as you think fit?' Conrad said.

'You both witnessed Colonel L'Estrange's signature to a paper, I see,' Mr. Sedley said, 'on the day of his fatal seizure.'

'Yes, sir.'

'At what time did that take place?'

'It was just on seven, Mr. Cox, the gardener said. I looked at my watch as I came up to the house. We came into the room directly.'

'Did you know the nature of the document you witnessed?'

'No, sir,' replied Cox. 'Colonel L'Estrange rang the bell and sent for me shortly before. He asked if the coachman was at hand, and then if Miss Dormer's coachman was about, but both were out. Then he said he wanted two witnesses to his signature, and I suggested sending for Mr. Simpson. He said

that would do nicely, and desired me to come with him to the library as soon as I could find him.'

'Was there anything in Colonel L'Estrange's manner to excite your attention?'

'Not the least, sir. He was rather flushed, but he was often that when he had been writing much, and I saw several letters lying by the post-bag. He was altogether just like himself.'

'And when you and Simpson came in?'

'Colonel L'Estrange was sitting at the table, sir. He had two papers, exactly alike, lying folded on the table by him.'

'Like this?' asked Mr. Sedley, showing the will folded.

'Yes, sir.'

'And then?'

'He took up one, glanced over it for a moment, and then gave a curious sort of smile. Then he laid it aside and took up the other. He read a few lines, and then he laid it down, and began signing the sheets as he turned them over. After that we signed as he directed, as witnesses.'

'Good. Now look at this document, and say if that is your signature?'

Cox took the will, looked at the signature, and said at once, 'Yes, sir, this is it.'

'Now, Simpson,' said Mr. Sedley.

The gardener took the paper, and looked carefully at it for a few moments. Then I saw that his hand began to tremble.

'No, sir,' he said, quietly but firmly. 'This is not the paper Mr. Cox and me witnessed.'

Gilbert Wilbraham cast a glance of vindictive triumph at Conrad, but he said nothing. I imagine the cutting contempt of his cousin's tone and manner, in their brief passage of arms, had annoyed him not a little, and put a stop to all wish on his part for a renewal of hostilities.

'How?' exclaimed Mr. Sedley in a startled tone. 'The other witness says it is.'

'Yes, sir, and so should I, but for a little circumstance Mr. Cox doesn't know of. Just as I sat down to sign my name the

Colonel spoke to him, and he didn't see what happened. I dipped my pen too deep in the ink, and a blot fell on the paper, just near the top. I was greatly put about at having done it, and blotted it as quick as I could, so as it shouldn't make much mark, and I hoped the Colonel wouldn't notice it. It did have a mark though, but it was but a slight one. But you may see for yourself, sir, this paper has never had a blot on it at all.'

The lawyer looked at Conrad. 'The affair is assuming a serious aspect,' my cousin said, quietly. 'I think we had better adjourn the discussion for the present. It is clear we must have a searching examination. That will do, Cox. You and Simpson can go.'

'As also I think may we,' said Lawrence L'Estrange, rising. He spoke a few words in a low voice to Conrad, and then left the room, followed by the other cousins who had been present at the funeral. Gilbert Wilbraham, Mr. Sedley, Conrad and I, alone remained.

'It is a most extraordinary affair,' Mr. Sedley said, as soon as we were alone. 'It is well for you to say there must be a searching investigation, L'Estrange, but who is going to move in the matter? The will is in your favour, and you are heir-at-law. All that you would gain by the probable trouble and expense of upsetting it would be the avoidance of the obligation to pay certain legacies, of no great consequence to you. The legatees under the will are not likely to interfere, and no one else is likely to risk heavy expense for the mere pleasure of finding out the truth.'

'Excuse me, Mr. Sedley, but one of the legatees is here to answer for himself,' put in Gilbert Wilbraham. 'People are not always quite so mercenary as you would seem to suppose. It is my intention to see this matter sifted to the bottom. Whether I lose or gain, in a pecuniary sense, has nothing to do with it. I had far too much regard for my late uncle to allow all his wishes to be set aside. Of course, I am not aware of the exact terms of the missing will, but I have no doubt, from the expressions in his letter, that it had committed to me certain powers to see

that life-long wishes of his were carried into effect. I think far more of that than of any advantage to myself. We cannot tell what careful examination may yet bring to light. I may yet find myself in a position to see my uncle's wishes carried out. But if not, I will never rest until I bring just retribution on those who have been guilty of this infamous attempt to thwart his just and wise measures.'

Then I began to understand his line of action. The legacy left to him was a handsome one, and bitter as his mortification must have been, he was not the man to let a desire for revenge run away with him, but he was so firmly convinced that Conrad and I had concocted the fraud between us, and that investigation must bring the fact to light, that he counted on our being absolutely in his power, bound to accept such terms as he dictated.

'In that case we had certainly better not continue the discussion. For the present, L'Estrange, I will with your permission, take possession of this document, and all the keys,' Mr. Sedley was just saying, when Cox entered.

'Parsons would like to make a statement, sir,' he said to Conrad.

'By all means,' he replied. 'Let her come in.'

Parsons appeared, and somewhat impertinently ignoring both Conrad and me, addressed herself directly to Mr. Sedley.

'I thought, sir, hearing as there was some difficulty about the will, I ought to mention one thing. When Miss Dormer told me the room would be wanted, the night Colonel L'Estrange died, I made up my mind I would do the whole work myself, so as not to let the under housemaids into the room in case of any papers lying about; so I laid the fire and did everything myself. The room wasn't touched again after that night until this morning, and then, when I came to do the grate, I saw some papers had been burned, and among the cinders I found this little bit of unburned paper, which looked as if it had fallen out of the grate. There was no remnants of burnt papers the night the Colonel died, and I thought it seemed a strange thing there

should have been any burning of papers just afterwards, so I kept this little piece by me.'

'Is that all you have to say?' asked Conrad, intervening before Mr. Sedley could reply.

'Yes, sir; that is all.'

'Very good. Give Mr. Sedley the paper and leave the room. If you take my advice you will not discuss the matter with anyone. You will very likely have to answer questions on oath, and if people get chattering it leads sometimes to discrepancies in accounts, which look ugly in a witness-box.'

Parsons retired, looking rather crestfallen. I watched closely, but not a glance passed between Gilbert and her. The paper she had brought was but a fragment, left as the flame had burned itself out among the cinders, and had no writing upon it. But the colour and texture were exactly similar to that of the paper on which the will was drawn.

Mr. Sedley made a little private mark on the fragment of paper and placed it carefully in his pocket-book.

'Now we may adjourn, I think,' he said. 'My opinion is we had better waive all further discussions until to-morrow, when we shall be able to find out if Mr. Warren can throw any light upon this curious transaction.'

'Just what I was about to suggest,' put in Gilbert Wilbraham. But Mr. Sedley ignored him with charming coolness.

'What do you say, L'Estrange?'

'I quite agree with you.'

'Very good. Meantime I should like a little chat with you. With your permission I will write a letter or two here, and then join you in your study. I think it will be best if you will allow me to keep the keys for the present.'

'Just what I should wish. You will find me in my study whenever you like to join me there.'

With that Conrad walked towards the door, and I escaped to my own sitting-room. I had not been there three minutes before Conrad joined me.

'Good God, Vera,' he said with much agitation, 'what does it mean?'

'Don't ask me, Conrad. Don't ask me to say a word until I have time to think over all the circumstances. It has been such a thunderclap. I feel quite confused. I do not want to say a word, or express any opinion, until I have time to think and recall accurately everything that passed.'

'I believe it will be best to follow Sedley's advice, and say nothing more until we hear what Warren can say about the matter to-morrow.'

'I am sure that will be best. If we get talking over it now, after such a shock and surprise, we shall only confuse ourselves. But, oh, Conrad! could not Mr. Wilbraham be thrust out of the discussion?'

'Hardly, I fear. You see it was my father's letter to him which first fired the train. At any rate, there is one advantage. I can show him now what I feel towards him. Heretofore I have always forbore, for my poor mother's sake. I knew it, Vera. I have felt all along that my poor father never voluntarily, just at that moment, signed a will in my favour.'

'You are transgressing,' I answered. 'Go now, and be ready to meet Mr. Sedley; and, above all things, make him quite understand your cousin's true character.'

With that Conrad left me—left me to face as best I might the crucial hour of my life.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ARMING FOR THE FIGHT.

THERE was no need for me to repeat to myself Conrad's question, 'What does it mean?' I knew what had happened as well as if I had been an eye-witness of the whole transaction. Adrian Warren had done the desperate deed out of sheer unselfish devotion to the man who had saved him from

ruin. The question I had to consider was how he was to be saved from the consequences. Saved he must be, and by me; and every word or action to which I committed myself must be carefully studied with that end in view. Love alone would have laid on me the necessity to save him at all costs from disgrace and ruin; but what love required, the voice of honour and the claim of the wronged as urgently demanded. It was I who had brought Adrian Warren to this pass. Had I not so strongly urged him, for Conrad's sake, to a technical breach of confidence, he would probably have never looked at the will. Could I be guilty of the unutterable meanness of leaving him to face the consequences of yielding to my insistence? And if love and honour called upon me to save him, one with them was the claim of the wife and children whom I had all unwittingly wronged. Was it not enough that I had destroyed for ever all chance of love growing up between Mrs. Warren and her husband, but I must now bring down upon her and her innocent children the meed of shame and disgrace the world meets out to the wife and children of a felon? No, Adrian Warren must be saved. But how?

A well disciplined brain is a good servant. I think mine had always been in pretty fair subjection to a somewhat imperious will, and now that will was a relentless tyrant, absolutely decreeing that the thing must be done, and sternly ordering the brain to devise the means. I cannot say it did not struggle hard, and loudly proclaim its inability to perform the required task. But at last, finding all remonstrance vain, it set to work, and after some floundering and plunging in the quagmire of doubt and difficulty, suddenly landed on the firm ground of a definite, though merely outlined design. There was much to fill in, but I had plenty of time before me.

The first urgent need was to put Adrian Warren on his guard, so arraying myself as if for a stroll through the grounds, I made for the stable yard. Two carriages had just gone off, taking Lawrence L'Estrange and the rest of the more distant relatives who had come for the funeral to the station, so I counted on

finding Jackson alone. The scent of a cigar in the shrubberies gave me a timely warning, and enabled me to avoid Mr. Wilbraham, prowling about as usual, probably in a less absolutely well satisfied frame of mind than hitherto. I gave Jackson my directions, then made my way through the kitchen garden back into the grounds, in a direction quite away from the stables. I had hoped thus to avoid Gilbert, but as I approached the house I saw him coming towards me. He at once threw away his cigar, and joined me.

'I am glad to see you out for a little fresh air, Miss Dormer,' he said. 'You look pale and worn.'

'I have been taking a short stroll,' I replied. 'I am just going in.'

'This has been a most startling and distressing discovery,' he said, after a moment's pause. 'I really wish I had your confidence, Miss Dormer.'

'Really?'

'Yes, indeed. It seems hardly a fitting time to renew our last conversation, but if I could feel we acted together in this painful matter it would greatly clear the way.'

Latest tactics resolved on, I said to myself. Buy over one accomplice, and make your own terms with the other. Thank Heaven I need no longer try to hold him in play.

'That, Mr. Wilbraham,' I coldly replied, 'you may rest assured will never, under any circumstances, happen on this side of eternity.'

He gave an angry start. I really believe he had never suspected I saw through him. What a superb actress lost I must have been.

'Miss Dormer,' he said in a very meaning tone, 'are you wise in trying to make an enemy of me at this moment.'

'How could I make you what you have been ever since I can remember anything?'

'Girl,' he exclaimed, 'are you mad? Do you not see that this business——?'

'I see, Mr. Wilbraham,' I interrupted, 'that this business is

one in which my cousin's advice to avoid chattering is eminently judicious.'

'Eminently, for *him*,' he answered, with a sinister smile, which clenched my determination to give his self-complacency a shock.

'Only one thing appears clear to me,' I said, looking him full in the face, with my hand on the door. 'Parsons will never get her three, five, or seven hundred pounds.'

He was not smiling as I left him standing on the gravel. I had no doubt Adrian Warren was right, that he had never given an accomplice a chance to prove undue influence against him. Still a bribed dependent was an awkward feature in the case; and the extent of the information I so unexpectedly betrayed must have been a severe and most unpleasant shock to him.

I do not think he enjoyed his dinner that evening, and he went out immediately afterwards, on the excuse of wishing to see one of the officers quartered at Wichborough, with whom he was acquainted. He did not return until after we had all retired for the night.

In the early morning sunlight I quietly slipped out of the house, mounted the cob, which Jackson had ready saddled for me in the stable-yard, and rode out of the gates, just as the clock was striking seven. The Warrens were always early. I should have plenty of time, after an interview with Adrian, to trot back to the Court, change my habit, and appear as usual at the half-past nine breakfast-table.

He came himself to the door as I rode up to the house. Our eyes met. There was no need for words. A strange spasm crossed his face, and he turned very pale, but he only said quietly, as he helped me to dismount—

'I will take your horse to the stable, and join you directly in the drawing-room.'

I was alone for some ten minutes. Was he nerving himself to face scornful upbraiding? He came at last, composed, but very white, and with a rigid set look upon his face. He closed the door, and setting his back against it, folded his arms, and

ooked at me in silence, with a sort of wild, hunted look in his eyes. He was waiting his sentence from my lips.

I went up to him, and laying both hands on his folded arms, looked up at him with I know not what expression, but I saw a sudden flash of surprise and joy pass over his face.

'Oh, Adrian,' I said, 'it was madness. How could you do it?'

He caught my hand, fervently kissed it, then crossed the room, and leaning his arm on the mantelpiece, rested his forehead upon it. After a brief struggle for composure, he looked up.

'How could I do otherwise? You little know what an iniquitous transaction has been foiled. In every possible way he had been made a mere puppet in that treacherous villain's hands. It was a will to make any man with a particle of spirit throw up everything, and rather work for his daily bread than accept the conditions. What could he do? I believe he would rather, had it been necessary, have thrown himself on your bounty than submit.'

He spoke with a suppressed passion, which gave tenfold force to his words. 'Why did you not burn both wills?' I asked.

He gave a start. 'How do you know there were two wills? or that I burned one? How did you find out anything?'

Then it flashed across me that in my own complete knowledge I had forgotten his ignorance. He had only divined that I had discovered something. He had as yet no suspicion of what was coming upon him.

As gently and quickly as possible I explained all that had happened. I can see now the dull grey look that came over his face, as the truth became clear to him.

'The felon's dock, after all,' he said, with a ghastly smile, 'but I don't regret it. He saved my life from utter ruin. But my poor wife and children! Vera, you will not let them suffer.'

'Neither them nor you, Adrian, if you will be guided by me. It is quite possible to save you. I know what no one else knows, and I can save you.'

'What do you know?'

'That is my affair. I know that you can be cleared. Of course there must be a trial. Mr. Wilbraham is bent upon that. But only show yourself perfectly willing it should be so, and plead not guilty, and I will pledge myself you shall come out clear.'

'Dear,' he said in a low sad tone, 'I cannot let you mix yourself up in my affairs. There is yourself to think of. It would give rise to so much scandal.'

'It shall give no rise to any scandal connecting your name and mine. I claim it, as a right, that you do as I wish. If I can clear you from this stain, the burden of years is lifted. When through my action your wife and children are saved from bearing a discredited name, I shall have more than atoned to them for all that has cost me so much pain and sorrow. You will not rob me of that great satisfaction, Adrian?'

'But how can I plead not guilty?'

'Because it is mere form. You merely do it to force those who accuse you to prove they have a case against you. You have wronged no man. You have simply risked utter ruin to save another from ruin. Would not even the judge who sentenced you be fain to admit your action lacked all the elements of crime? Why give the scoundrel you have thwarted a chance to revenge himself?'

'But it is impossible to clear me.'

'I will make it more impossible to convict you. You have not been watching everything as I have done. Come to the Court this morning, as you intended. Then you will hear all. The position in which you stand is evident. Nothing but a trial could clear you now. The rest is easy.'

He shook his head. 'I cannot believe it. Tell me what you intend.'

'No. My action will be more effectual if it is wholly unexpected by everyone. You must trust me to save you, to save your wife and children.'

Still I could not win a promise from him. Again and again

I urged him, but I could see a dread of in any way compromising me held him back from committing himself. At last, when I saw that I must linger no longer, I sped my last and most powerful shaft.

'You are allowing an unlawful love to override your judgment, Adrian,' I said. 'If you did not love me, if you thought only of your wife and children, you would catch at every chance of saving your good name, for their sakes. You are risking them for fear some sort of discredit should attach to me. Why should you approve of my risking discredit to save Edith Mason from the consequences of her own folly, and hesitate about any such chance, when the wholly innocent are in danger, to whom I owe reparation? It is because you are letting personal feeling sway your judgment.'

I saw he winced, but I could not even then win a distinct promise from him. He was too much confused and bewildered, he said. He would think it over, and be to some extent guided by what happened at the Court. I think he hoped that when he had time for thought he might divine what course I meant to take. There was little chance of that. I had not much doubt what the result of his reflections would be. He loved his children dearly, and many trifling signs had shown me that his love for me made him almost nervously sensitive about his conduct to his wife. They were the weapons by means of which I should win.

Nevertheless, the suspense was terrible, until he entered the library, where we were all assembled. Then, by his whole bearing, I felt I had won. His face was grave, almost stern in expression.

'Some strange rumours are floating about this morning,' he said to Conrad. 'I have been greatly startled.'

'They cannot be stranger than the truth, Warren. We are in hopes you may be able to throw some light upon an inscrutable mystery.'

'Let me hear what has happened.'

Mr. Sedley described clearly and minutely the occurrences of

the previous day. Adrian listened intently, without the least attempt to conceal his anxious interest in the recital. I saw Gilbert Wilbraham was watching him keenly, and after a while I perceived an expression of malignant triumph steal over his face. What new departure in iniquity might that portend? I could only watch and wait.

'Can you throw any light on this strange transaction, Mr. Warren?' the lawyer asked. 'In face of the evidence it is difficult not to believe a forgery has been committed; but how, and when, it is equally difficult to imagine. Can you suggest any possible explanation of the mystery?'

'The only thing clear to me, Mr. Sedley,' said Adrian, slowly and gravely, 'is that I myself am the person on whom suspicion most naturally falls.'

'Warren,' exclaimed Conrad, and I saw a quick spasm of pain and terror cross his face. Mr. Sedley merely elevated his eyebrows, as he remarked with professional coolness:

'Perhaps; but for the total absence of all motive.'

The moment when I must intervene had come. My heart was beating almost to suffocation, and I was making desperate efforts to steady myself enough to speak, when Gilbert Wilbraham took up his parable, and played my game for me as no one else could have played it.

'That has yet to be proved, Mr. Sedley,' he said: 'and I for one am tired of all this hesitating and temporising. If a painful thing has to be done, the sooner it is done the better for all concerned. The truth has been growing almost momentarily clearer to me since I first learned the circumstances. I am not going, as I believe has been the hope in some quarters, to let the matter drop. I have reason to believe no one has been more cruelly defrauded by this transaction than myself. If my uncle's will was drawn up at all upon the lines indicated by him in his letter to me, I have not the least doubt he had carried out what he had always openly told me was his intention, and left to me the reversion of the bulk at least of his property, in the event of my cousin leaving no family. Even if I cannot

make good my claim I have no intention of submitting tamely to a disgraceful swindle, if I can bring the authors of it to justice. I distinctly charge Mr. Adrian Warren with having destroyed the will my uncle did sign, and forged the signatures to the one produced.'

'Thank you, Mr. Wilbraham,' said Adrian, rising. 'You have cleared my course for me. You see now, Mr. Sedley, it is out of the question that I should discuss the matter. My position is undoubtedly awkward. I must take legal advice before I commit myself in any way.'

'Yes : you are quite right there.'

'Therefore you will excuse my retiring, Mr. L'Estrange. I shall not fly the country, Mr. Wilbraham. I shall be found at the Manor at any time.'

'My dear Warren,' exclaimed Conrad, 'do not leave us in this way. You cannot suppose—'

'Anything but what is honourable and upright of you, Mr. L'Estrange. But I would rather hold no conversation with anyone until I have time to grasp the true facts of the position. At present I feel rather bewildered.'

'The position is painful,' Mr. Warren,' I said, 'but, believe me, a trial, which Mr. Wilbraham's line of action will necessitate, is the best possible thing for you. Nothing can so effectually clear your character. Whether the results will leave him much inclination to rejoice is quite another thing.'

With a cordial pressure of my hand he left the room.

'Mr. Wilbraham,' Conrad said coldly, 'so long as this matter is in abeyance this house is mine. I shall be obliged by your leaving it as soon as possible. If you will let the butler know how soon you require a carriage he will attend to it, and I shall be glad, Vera, if you will see the head housemaid is paid whatever is necessary, and ordered to be out of the house before night. I have not been quite so blind as I am supposed to have been.'

Gilbert Wilbraham, who had turned very white, got up and, without a word, abruptly left the room.

'You are going rather fast, L'Estrange,' said the lawyer, with

professional caution. 'The case is rather risky, I can tell you. We do not know what cards that fellow holds.'

'He holds none,' I put in. 'He only thinks he does. I see it quite clearly. He was puzzled at first; now he feels confident Mr. Warren is the actual perpetrator of the forgery, at my cousin's and my instigation. He calculates that as soon as it is clear a trial is inevitable, Mr. Warren will confess, to shield himself, and that then it will be easy to dictate terms to Conrad and me.'

The lawyer smiled approvingly upon me.

'A shrewd surmise, certainly. But you have no interest in the will. Why should he mix you up in it?'

'Because he has not known me for a good many years for nothing,' I replied. 'But there are two surprises in store for him. Mr. Warren, having nothing to confess, will confess nothing; and a trial will thoroughly clear him.'

'My dear young lady,' replied Mr. Sedley, 'you are over confident. Unless some very extraordinary evidence turns up, the case, properly conducted, is much more likely to lead to a conviction. I have rarely known one in which the evidence was more complete. To tell the truth, I have not, myself, the least doubt Mr. Warren did it. The facts allow no other conclusion. The only puzzle, apart from the untenable theory of bribery, is the motive. Enormous risk, and nothing to gain. I suppose he must have some wrongs, real or imaginary, to avenge on Mr. Wilbraham.'

Mr. Sedley was an honest upright man, but not one, I imagine, who would ever have dreamed of the possibility of anyone risking penal servitude purely to serve the interests of another, without the remotest chance of reaping any personal advantage out of the transaction if successful.

'Time will show who is right,' I replied, as I left the room to attend to Conrad's request, leaving Mr. Sedley, I doubt not, convinced I was a most self-opinionated young woman, as intolerant of contradiction as most heiresses. Parsons, however, was not to be found. She had taken the hint, and her box was

packed up, with a label attached, begging it might be given to whomsoever should call for it.

Conrad came to my sitting-room shortly afterwards, and threw himself on a sofa with an air of pain and weariness that cut me to the heart. Poor Conrad! for him, at least, I knew there was deep and lasting sorrow in store, whatever happened.

'Vera,' he said, 'I think this wretched business will kill me. What does it mean? I cannot but see that Sedley is right. The evidence is complete, cruelly complete. Surely Warren cannot—?' He hesitated, in much agitation.

'Do not be afraid, Conrad,' I answered. 'Mr. Warren will come clear out of the tangle.'

'But how? Consider the evidence!'

'Wait until witnesses are examined on oath.'

'Vera,' he exclaimed, 'do you know anything you have kept back?'

'Yes.'

'Dear, you are making a mistake. You should keep nothing back from the lawyers who have to manage the case.'

'I am making no mistake, you will see. Does Mr. Sedley act for Mr. Warren?'

'No. He said even if he asked him he would beg him to place his case in other hands. As our family solicitor, he thinks he might find himself rather awkwardly situated.'

'Well, Conrad, you need have no fear on Mr. Warren's account. I know you must have pain and distress over this business, but you will not have to feel the man you saved from ruin has ruined himself to save you. He told me that story long ago. He will come clear out of a trial.'

Conrad sighed wearily. 'It would have been well had I died long since,' he said. 'Then useful lives would not have been clouded for my sake.'

'And a splendid property would have become the prey of a ruined gambler. Your father would have left everything to Gilbert Wilbraham.'

Was it a crime that Adrian Warren had committed? It was



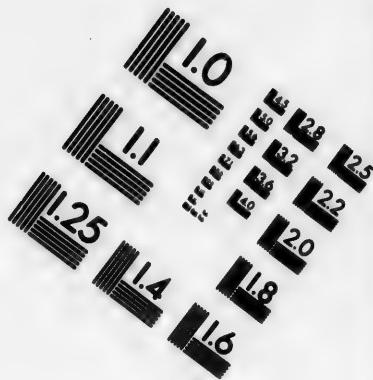
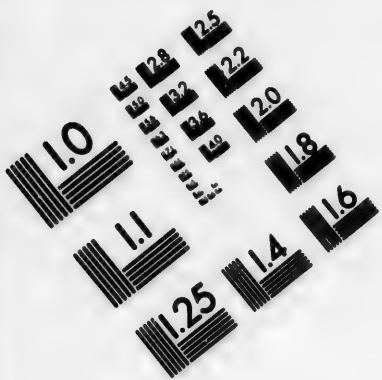
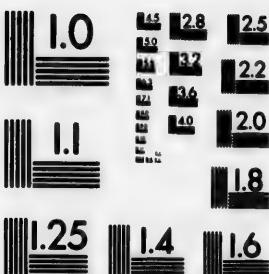
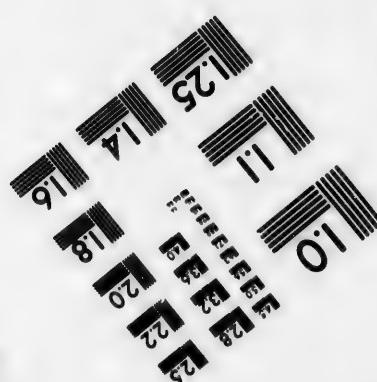
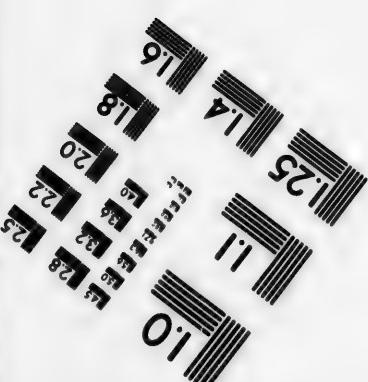


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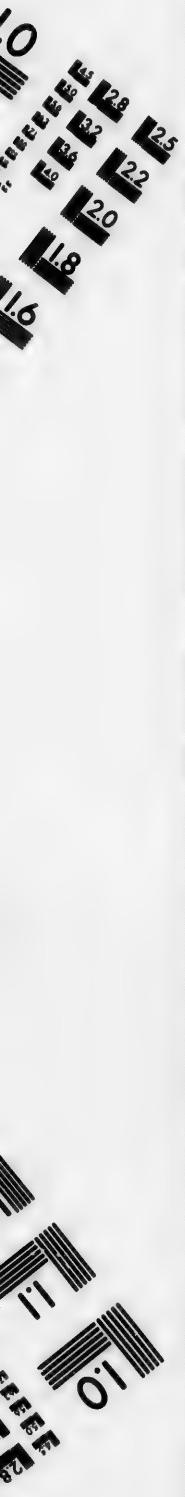


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a breach of the law, most certainly ; but could there be a crime without a sin ? and could there be sin where gratification of no selfish passion was sought, nor any personal advantage striven for at the expense of others ? Where simply total ruin was risked, to hinder a gross injustice, and save from a cruel fate a benefactor to whom life-long gratitude was due ? Often, in later years, have I pondered that question, but it remains, for me, unanswered. We are all more or less in bondage to the moral system under which we have grown up, and are perhaps wisest if we leave its tares and its wheat to grow together until the harvest. Even granting that we root up only the tares, I am not sure the wheat will grow any the better for the unsettling results of the disturbance of the soil. At the time I gave very little thought to any abstract moral features of the question. Mr. Charlote's teaching had done its work. I had little love for moralising and drawing useful lessons from the backslidings of any human being. No fellow-creature stood at my judgment seat. If he stumbled or fell, it was my task to aid him to the utmost of my ability, without any particular question as to how he came to stumble. In the present case it was the man I loved who was in sore danger, from which I, and I alone, could save him ; the woman I had unwittingly wronged, to whom I could make full atonement. That view of the subject was all there was room for in my mind, and I had abundance of occupation for both time and thought.

CHAPTER XXVII.

VICTORY IN DEFEAT.

I SUPPOSE there was much raging and foaming of the restless sea of gossip surging at our very doors, but I heard nothing of it. The Wichboroughs were abroad, and Mr. Charlote was away, so there was no one in Wichborough I cared about, and no one in Wichborough, I imagine, who cared to cross-examine me,

I think grave doubts as to the result of his action on his own interests must have begun to steal over Gilbert Wilbraham when he perceived that there were no signs of the total surrender which, I am convinced, he had counted upon as the certain consequence of his determination to take legal measures, but that rather Adrian Warren's case had been placed in very able hands, and the most celebrated counsel in England retained for the defence. But who may hope to fathom all the workings, or forecast the strange blunders of a thoroughly crooked mind? Perhaps rage and mortification had a little confused his judgment; or it may be that he was not wholly his own master. The course of his life had not been such as to leave all the threads of it absolutely in his own hand, and it is marvellously easy for those to decide a course of action as the right one who have everything to gain if it succeeds, little or nothing to lose if it fails.

Conrad and I had been, of course, subpoenaed, counsel having no doubt been warned that we should be unwilling witnesses, and certainly, as the time for the trial drew near, Adrian Warren's prospects did not seem to brighten. I think hope almost died out in Conrad's heart when we had a hasty visit from an old clergyman who had also been subpoenaed. He had formerly been head master of a large school in the north of England, where Adrian had been a pupil, and was well aware that he had, from boyhood, possessed a remarkable facility for imitating signatures. He had himself remonstrated with him on the danger of cultivating such a faculty, finding that Adrian was in the habit of practising it for the amusement of his companions. Gilbert Wilbraham had unearthed, or remembered this fact, and the evidence seemed to be about all that was wanted to insure a conviction.

Mr. Sedley shook his head when Conrad told him of this circumstance. 'An awkward piece of evidence,' he said. 'Does it shake your confidence, Miss Dormer?'

'Not in the least.'

'He shrugged his shoulders. 'Well,' he said, 'Mr. Warren is in first-rate hands; but I was discussing the case the other day

with one of the best men we have now at the bar. He does not see what they can make of it. I fear, Miss Dormer, your very judicious action with regard to the keys will pretty nearly doom Mr. Warren to penal servitude. I can hardly see what defence can be set up.'

'Let them wait until they have to set up a defence,' I replied, sententiously. 'Then, perhaps, they will find the means.'

Mr. Sedley vouchsafed no reply. I think my profane impertinence was too much for him. I confess, where the great Mr. ——, I have quite forgotten his name, saw little hope! Silent contempt was my fitting meed.

'The will has been microscopically examined,' he said to Conrad. 'No trace of any blot can be detected, and experts are in favour of the signatures being forgeries, though very clever ones.'

The days passed rapidly, for I was very busy. I had many arrangements to make which must be made without exciting any attention, beside constant occupation of a wholly secret nature. I felt quite cool and collected. If it was the coolness of intense mental tension, I must have possessed an enormous amount of nerve force, for there was no subsequent collapse.

One satisfactory result, for me, arose out of the tumultuous seething of the Wichborough sea of gossip, and that was that the court was induced to change the venue, and order the trial to take place in London. My cousin and Adrian Warren were both very popular men in general, but there had been lately a very sharply contested election, at which party feeling had run very high, and as both had taken an active part in securing the return of the successful candidate, there was a mortified angry minority on one side, against an enthusiastic, exulting majority on the other side, and it was very apparent that, under the circumstances, an impartial trial of the case, in the immediate neighbourhood, could not be hoped for. Prejudice, one way or the other, would be inevitable. We went to London on the day before the trial was to take place. I felt very conscious, then, of being in that peculiar mental condition which retains no

impression save of the infinitely great and the infinitely little ; when side by side with some tremendous subject, absorbing every faculty, we retain keen perception of ludicrous trifles, which, under ordinary circumstances, we should never remember at all, while the common incidents of every day life, generally remembered almost automatically, wholly escape us. I do not in the least recollect at what hotel we stayed, but I see before me now the exact pattern of the wall paper at which I lay gazing in the early morning light, on the day of the trial.

I had not brought Murray with me, deeming it well to begin at once dispensing with a lady's maid ; but I took care to dress myself with special regard to appearance. It was no part of my design to appear in the least distracted or excited. To this hour I can remember the particular attention I bestowed on the portentous bonnet-strings of the day. I vaguely recollect driving through the streets, with Conrad and Mr. Sedley, much more vividly how nearly we ran over a dog in turning a corner. At last, after some little confusion, I found myself seated in the court.

'That is the Attorney-General,' Mr. Sedley whispered to me, as a tall, rather stern-looking man rose and began to speak. 'Lucky for you, Miss Dormer, you are not on the opposite side. He is a terrible fellow for a cross-examination.'

I knew nothing of legal procedure. I had never been before in a law court in my life ; but as I listened to the Attorney-General stating the case, I could not wonder at Mr. Sedley's despondent view of Adrian's chances. He seemed to close up every loop-hole for escape. But when he said that he should call witnesses to prove that a will had unquestionably been signed, but that it was not the will now produced ; also that it was impossible the substitution of the forged for the true will could have been effected by any one save Mr. Warren, I smiled to think of the little surprise that was in store for him.

Cox and Simpson were the first witnesses examined, to prove the signing of the will, and a sharp cross-examination failed in any way to shake Simpson's evidence regarding the blot which

had played so important a part in the case, or that of experts respecting the signatures. Then I heard my own name. It acted like an electric shock. A sort of tremulous agitation which, as the climax drew near, had been creeping over me, passed away, and I felt perfectly cool and collected. Not even a passing glance I caught from Adrian Warren, a glance of mingled dread and perplexity, had any power to shake me. I took the oath with the utmost coolness and deliberation.

'Now, Miss Dormer,' began the Attorney-General, with an air of portentous solemnity, such as I suppose he conceived would impress upon a frivolous young woman the gravity of the situation, 'I must ask you to recall to your memory the occurrences of the afternoon of Tuesday, the 5th of last May. I understand that immediately after Colonel L'Estrange's sudden seizure you locked the door of the library.'

'I did.'

'Did you go into the room before doing so?'

'No. I merely looked in, to make sure no one was in the room.'

'And the key remained in your possession?'

'Yes.'

'When was the room next entered by anyone?'

'The following evening, when I desired the housemaid to prepare it for use.'

'For what purpose?'

'To enable Mr. Warren to examine Colonel L'Estrange's papers for my cousin, and see if there were any memoranda of wishes respecting his funeral, or any other matters requiring immediate attention.'

'Why was Mr. Warren selected for that task?'

'Because Mr. L'Estrange felt unequal to it, after the shock he had received; and Mr. Warren was the only confidential friend at hand.'

'Good,' he said. 'We are getting on better than I expected.'

'The more important point,' I replied, 'is whether you are sure you are getting on in the right direction.'

It was not a piece of gratuitous impertinence. I wanted to make it perfectly evident that I was quite cool and collected. There was a little titter in the court, and I thought the learned counsel looked slightly disconcerted. I daresay he made sure he would have his revenge. After a moment's pause he went on.

'From whom did Mr. Warren receive the keys necessary for this purpose?—I mean those of cabinets or other receptacles for papers?'

'From Mr. L'Estrange.'

'And to whom did he return them?'

'To me.'

'The same evening?'

'Yes.'

'How long was Mr. Warren in the library?'

'About three hours.'

'And after he returned the keys to you, what became of them?'

'They remained in my possession.'

'All the keys?—I mean both of cabinets and drawers, as well as the door key?'

'Yes.'

'Did Mr. Warren say anything about the papers?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, he did! Well, we will come to that presently. Those keys were not afterwards out of your possession?'

'Not until the day of the funeral.'

'And from the time Mr. Warren returned them to you, until the day of the funeral, no one entered the room?'

'Yes; I did.'

'For what purpose?'

I paused a moment, looked him full in the face, and then answered, slowly and distinctly—

'For the purpose of forging signatures to the unsigned will, and burning the signed one.'

With something between a gasp and a groan Adrian Warren

buried his face in his hands. Otherwise there was, for a moment, a silence that might be felt. But for a slight twitching of the forehead, the Attorney-General might have been carved out of stone. The judge, after one keen, piercing glance at me, looked at the counsel, counsel looked at each other, and every other human being in the crowded court stared at me.

'Is that to be regarded as a statement made on oath?' the Attorney-General asked at length.

'Certainly.'

'Then why on earth have you allowed this case to go on?'

'Partly because I judged that under the circumstances nothing but an examination in court could effectually clear Mr. Warren's character; partly because I knew if the faintest suspicion of the truth dawned upon him, he would plead guilty in order to shield me.'

'What! perjure himself to save you?'

'Yes. I was the accidental means once of saving Mr. Warren from being murdered. I knew he would never let me suffer, if he could thrust himself into my place.'

'You seem to have a high opinion of him.'

'It would be impossible for me to have any other.'

'But what was your object in committing so grave a crime, Miss Dormer?' asked the judge.

'For years I have been striving to defeat, if possible, the nefarious attempts of Mr. Wilbraham to induce Colonel L'Estrange to disinherit my cousin, and make him his heir. I learned, through accidentally overhearing a discussion between Mr. Wilbraham and the woman Parsons, who was a spy in his pay, that it was probable Colonel L'Estrange had two wills ready for signature. I was sure he had signed one that afternoon, and was determined to destroy it if it was in Mr. Wilbraham's favour. When I found them both I judged it best to substitute one for the other, as a safeguard in case of the existence of a prior will.'

'When did you learn to imitate signatures so well?'

'When I needed to do it. I had never tried till then. Now I can write very fair copies of the three with my eyes shut.'

That was perfectly true. A part of my precaution against possible failure in my attempt, had been an incessant copying of the signatures to the will, until I could make very fair imitations without even looking at what I wrote.

'You know, then, what were the terms of the destroyed will?'

'No, I do not. I could not make out the legal phraseology. I only made out just enough to see that the unsigned one was the one in my cousin's favour.'

During this brief colloquy a hurried consultation had been going on between counsel. The Attorney-General turned to the judge.

'I think, my lord, we must ask for an adjournment.'

'It seems to me you have no case to adjourn, if this statement is to be accepted.'

'That is the very point to be decided.'

'Miss Dormer,' the judge said, in a grave but kindly tone, 'do you adhere to your statement, clearly understanding that if you do you will have to be detained in custody, on charge of forgery, an offence to which a very heavy penalty is attached?' I suspected then that that massive-browed legal luminary was hunting nearer to the scent than anyone else.

'I do, my lord.'

Then there followed a short discussion between judge and counsel, and a number of formalities seemed to me to be gone through, but I did not clearly hear what was said, and in truth gave very little attention to what passed. I think the tension on my nerves was more severe then than at any other time during the acting of that strange drama. Now it had to be seen what course Adrian Warren would follow. Would he, in frenzied excitement, fail to grasp the full bearings of the case, and commit himself to some desperate attempt to save me? I knew, if he paused to think, he must see that he could not extricate himself from the trap into which I had lured him. But might he ruin himself in a frantic effort to do so? The dread of that one, and one only possible frustration of my carefully planned scheme effectually prevented me from knowing much about what was

passing round me. Come what might, one point was absolutely certain. Whatever might be the legal result of my action, I had most effectually accomplished the social downfall of Mr. Gilbert Wilbraham. He had passed near me, making his way out of court, during the discussion between the judge and counsel, and the look of baffled rage, mortification and hatred he bestowed upon me was in itself sufficient indemnification for all I might have to suffer. I had also seen Mrs. Cranley and Mrs. Duncombe hastily leaving the court. I wonder if their denunciations of my appalling wickedness were at all tempered by the gratitude they ought to have felt for my resolute refusal of all intimate acquaintance?

On my first interview with Adrian Warren, after the adjournment of the trial, I dare not dwell, even now. It was very brief—a sharp, short agony, in which, maddened by pain, he did not spare to upbraid me bitterly for what I had done. Those reproaches had no power to sting. They only aided his passionate self-abandonment in revealing to me, for the first time, the full depth of the love which for years, in obedience to the voice of honour, to the claim of a young, inexperienced girl on the deeper insight and matured experience of a man of riper years, he had held sternly repressed. One satisfaction I gained from the interview. He saw the uselessness of any attempt to undo what I had done; saw that my action had been too calm and deliberate to be represented as a frenzied attempt to save him; and that to save me from a charge of forgery, by substituting a certainty of perjury, with the accompanying inevitable revelation of motives sure to be misinterpreted, would only place me in a worse position than I occupied. I had not myself seen the full strength of my position until I learned it from hearing his despairing admissions. I had acted without the least thought of self, and as often happens, when that is the case, had followed a course of action far more potent to secure the end I had in view than I had myself been aware.

Almost harder, however, to face than Adrian's despair, was

the deep distress of Conrad L'Estrange believing that I had really done the deed for his sake.

'It was an awful mistake, my poor little cousin, to run such a fearful risk—he did not say commit such a crime—'for my sake. I would rather have been turned upon the world penniless and trusted to you for a maintenance.'

'Do not talk about it, Conrad,' I replied. 'I could not bear to see Gilbert Wilbraham triumph just when we thought all was safe.'

'No, dear. That is just what I see. I have selfishly left you to bear too much. The long strain and anxiety has been beyond your strength, and when the climax came feverish excitement confused your judgment.'

'No, Conrad, you were never further from the truth in your life. All I have done I have done with perfect coolness and deliberation. It is not you alone who are the gainer. My dying father bade me spend my life and fortune in the service of others. The discipline before me will greatly increase my power to do that wisely, as well as unweariedly. And I have saved for you to use in the same way the fortune which would otherwise have been squandered in profligate extravagance. It is painful for you, I know, but you will come to see that thousands will be the gainers, while only a few suffer for what I have done. Do not let us talk any more about it.'

I could not bear to discuss the point with him. I could perjure myself in the witness box with a light heart, but I could not endure to carry on the falsehood with one I loved so well; and yet for the sake of one I loved still better I must be for ever silent, even to my cousin, regarding a truth, the knowledge of which would, indeed, have been little less painful to him than the delusion under which he must live and die. His was not the first, and will not be the last noble nature doomed to sorrow deeply for results springing from its own inevitable tendency to excite deep passionate devotion.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

'ONWARD INTO LIGHT.'

THERE was some delay before the final proceedings, but I, of course, knew very little of what passed. Gilbert Wilbraham was, I believe, making frantic but vain efforts to find out where the two wills had been drawn up, with some wild idea of establishing his rights. Like most rogues he had hung himself at last. He had simply relieved Conrad from all necessity to pay him the legacy left to him, and insured the property going to my cousin as absolutely as if Colouel L'Estrange had never made a will.

There was, of course, no possibility of extricating me from the position in which my statement in the witness-box had placed me. Every circumstance that told against Adrian Warren told with tenfold force against me, just because time and opportunity were so largely on my side. The brilliant counsel who had been retained for the defence of Adrian was charged with the task of doing all that could be done to procure the lightest possible sentence. When he rose in the densely crowded court to address the jury on my behalf, I marvelled what he could find to say that would carry any weight in palliation of my supposed offence, beyond the self-evident fact that I had not been actuated by any self-interested motive. But he had not uttered many sentences ere I found myself listening as breathlessly as the rest of his audience to, admittedly, as fine a piece of eloquence as was ever heard at the bar, and lost in amazement at his wonderful mastery of detail. Had he been intimately associated with me from my childhood he could scarcely have seemed better acquainted with the whole tenor of my life. In finely contrasted bursts of scathing scorn and melting pathos, he drew a vivid picture of the deliberate treachery of Gilbert Wilbraham, and my unselfish devotion to the cousin whose noble character, and unvarying kindness to me from childhood, had endeared him so

deeply to me ; of the strong temptation which had, at last, overmastered my judgment, rather than my moral sense, and led me to the commission of a blameless crime ; and of the generosity with which I had faced all the pain and humiliation of a public avowal, in order to clear more thoroughly than a private confession could do the character of an innocent man. I almost forgot my own identity, and, as though I had no personal concern in the matter, listened to his eloquent pleading, with keen sympathy for its object, and exultation over the ruin his fiery denunciations must bring on the villain he ruthlessly unmasked. The stone which Gilbert Wilbraham had set rolling, had returned upon him with a vengeance. Never again would he be able to show his face in society. Ere the peroration of the speech was reached more than one of the jury had furtively passed his hand across his eyes ; and when the speaker sat down, a burst of applause, instantly suppressed, bore witness to the success of his eloquence.

A strong recommendation to mercy was the result of his appeal. Then the judge addressed me, and as he pronounced my name I involuntarily looked up at him. Our eyes met ; he paused abruptly, and for an instant we looked at each other. I know not how or why, but my suspicion became a certainty. He had surmised or divined the truth. He was a man who could be sternly severe, but who was also daring in the extent to which he would relax law, when his clear, impartial judgment deemed that justice claimed such relaxation ; and he was, in general, singularly calm and unmoved in demeanour. When he began to speak his voice was trembling audibly, and I saw more than one amazed glance turned upon him. There was a strange hesitation, moreover, once or twice, in his choice of phrases, very suggestive of a desire to avoid definitely naming the crime I had committed. In a tone of almost fatherly kindness he pointed out to me that I had allowed excited feeling to overpower my moral sense, and led me to an action it was impossible to justify. Whatever view might be taken of my motives, I had unquestionably been guilty of a crime to which the law attached

a very heavy penalty ; and although, in my case, all the usual incentives to the line of action I had followed were wanting, still, in the interests of justice, it could not be passed over too lightly. In consideration, however, of the recommendation of the jury, and of all the circumstances of the case, he felt justified in awarding a lighter penalty than would ordinarily follow a crime so deliberately planned. He should condemn me to be kept in penal servitude for five years. His voice faltered so much as he pronounced the sentence that the words were only just audible. His evident emotion was contagious. I think nearly half the audience were in tears, and I believe, I was almost the only person perfectly unmoved when I left the court, no longer 'the accused,' but a convict under sentence of five years' penal servitude.

Shortly after I was removed from the court I had a farewell interview with Adrian Warren, who had, I knew, been hurrying on preparations for going to Australia, and was to start immediately. It was an unspeakably sad and solemn interview, for we both knew we were bidding each other farewell for ever in this world. Moreover, the moment Adrian entered the room, I knew that in saving his character I had killed him. He was a broken-hearted man, with not many years of life before him.

We met without restraint. The love of which we had hardly dared to think, when we met constantly in the familiar intercourse of every-day life, might be safely confessed now, when we met for the last time ere thousands of miles of ocean should roll between us. That one last interview, my only guerdon for my blighted life, might well be granted, even by the wife who, with untarnished name, and in almost childish eagerness, was preparing for a change, the prospect of which delighted her.

With my hands clasped on his breast, and his arms wreathed lightly round my shoulders, we stood and looked into each other's eyes, as we had never hitherto dared to look.

'Vera, Vera,' he said, 'you have broken my heart !'

'I have saved your good name, Adrian.'

'Yes, in the eyes of the world, and doomed me to go forth

bearing a stainless name, to which I have no right, and which yet for your sake I dare not cast off, at the cost of the total wreck of your life. A man saved by the sacrifice of a woman! Oh, Vera, it was cruel. You might have left me to my fate.'

'Dear Adrian,' I said, 'do you think I did not know what I was doing? Do you think it was not the hardest part of my task to battle down the certainty that I was thrusting upon you a life-long wretchedness which I may not hope either to soothe or to share? But it had to be done. Your wife and children had to be saved at all costs. I have foiled the dread sentence for once. The sins of the fathers shall not be visited on the children.'

'Yes, dear. I know it. I know it all. I can follow every prompting of your noble nature, but I cannot feel it. The dull agony of that one thought that I go free, while your life is wrecked and ruined, deadens every other sensation.'

'That is your part of the penalty, Adrian, and is it not by far the harder part? Do you think I do not love you far too well not to have shrunk from inflicting this cruel anguish on you, but for the firm resolve, of years since, that love should always yield to the voice of honour? I have more than atoned for the evil I wrought. And in facing the trial dauntlessly, you too atone for whatever share of blame is due to you. Every moment of your wife's happy possession of an untarnished name; every moment of Clara's and Bertram's joyous youth, undimmed by shadow of shame, is my reward for having cast both you and myself into the furnace.'

He shook his head sadly. 'The wreck and ruin of your life,' he repeated.

'My life is not wrecked and ruined, it is only shadowed. Lonely it must have been for the sake of the love which is its choicest treasure. Do you think it will be so very much darker because society carefully draws away its gilded fringes from the polluting contact?'

'You are young. You do not know all that means. In time you might have learned to forget, and be happy.'

'I am a criminal under sentence of penal servitude,' I said, 'but that has brought me no sense of degradation. Did the day ever come when I could forget and be happy, knowing that you still live and love me, I should know the uttermost depths of degradation. No, dear Adrian, we part now for ever in this world, having won through hopeless defeat a splendid victory in the struggle of years. You go your way to fight on manfully to the end. I go mine to fulfil to the utmost of my ability my father's last injunctions. All that we suffer is but the price of our victory. Thank God for this one last interview, in which we could dare mutually to fathom the depth of our love for each other.'

A faint wan smile passed over his face. 'The fight will not be very long for me, dear, I think. Long ago, Vera, you saved my wife and children from widow and orphanhood. Now you have saved them from lasting disgrace. What you have done, for them and for me, between then and now, you little dream, but you will know some day. But oh, Vera,' he added bitterly, 'it is hard to forgive the duplicity that wrecked my life, when I think what might have been, had we only met ere it was too late.'

Almost as he spoke the message came that the time allowed for the interview was over. Then, one long last look, one fervent embrace, one lingering passionate pressure of his lips to mine, and the door closed behind his wasted form. Adrian Warren and I had seen each other for the last time in this world.

Penal servitude is not an enjoyable experience, but for me it had many alleviations. My thoughts were constantly busy with plans for the future, and almost every day I passed amidst the painful associations and monotonous routine of a convict prison, was deepening the knowledge and widening the views with which I should enter on the future occupations of my life.

When at last I found myself free, I found my work for the moment ready for me. Conrad's health had failed rapidly during the past year, and he was only waiting for me to accompany

him in order to seek the benefit of a milder and less changeable climate. I think also he cherished a hope that he might induce me to settle permanently abroad. I might have made myself the mistress of an earthly paradise, amidst the loveliest scenery of Europe, for all my cousin's fortune, as well as my own, was at my disposal. But such a life would ill have accorded with my aims and objects, or with the avoidance, to which I was so solemnly pledged, of the enervating influence of refined luxury.

My cousin's life of patient endurance and unmerited sadness came to an end in little more than a year after we left England, and then, when it appeared that my name was not even mentioned in his will, Wichborough was able to vindicate, at his expense, the fine generosity and impartial justice of its sentiments, as, hitherto, in denunciation of my crime, it had vindicated its austere morality. It was monstrous! Whatever my culpability, Mr. L'Estrange should at least have remembered that he owed everything to me, and made some suitable acknowledgment. Conrad's acknowledgment had been the simple words: 'The property is yours, Vera. You must do what you please with it.' I doubt if he even read the will I brought to him for signature. So Lawrence L'Estrange succeeded to the heritage of his ancestors, and one more competent and faithful steward was placed in a position to administer wealth and influence for the public benefit, not for selfish ends.

A few months after my cousin's death a long letter from Clara Warren gave me a full account of her father's last days on earth. With it was enclosed a sealed packet, a treasure beyond all price. The closely written sheets it contained,—the product of many a lonely hour,—not only poured forth all the devotion which, ere death from the bonds which had wrecked his life, would be free to leave as his last legacy to the one woman he had ever loved, but explained what he had meant when he said I should some day know what I had done for him and his family. They told me how, when we first met, and the blood of a strong man in the prime of life was running hot in his veins, his courage to

endure the desert waste of his domestic life was ebbing fast away ; while syren voices, luring him to distraction, at least in a life of reckless dissipation, if not, in the first instance, of actual profligacy, were almost daily gaining greater power over him ; and how the love we had both had strength to hold firmly within the bounds of honour, had saved him, had turned the sweet music of the syren call to harsh discord, and had nerved him to live and die a kind and blameless husband, a loving father, and a man universally respected for the purity, as well as the integrity, and genial kindness of his life. Truly the injury I had done to Annie Warren had carried its own atonement inextricably bound up with it.

Since then I have lived a busy and quietly happy life, striving ever to live up to my father's dying charge ; to live, work, and if it must be, suffer for others, and to count it a far higher duty thus to spend life, than money. And I know that many a sad, sore, and sorrowing heart has cause to bless his memory ; while many a sin-laden soul has reaped a rich harvest from the experience gained during the five years I passed in a convict prison. My life, as my father foretold, has been no path of roses, but neither has it been one of thorns. The one act which has had its most ample reward, has been the one act of my life which, in the judgment of ordinary morality, was its one crime. Adrian's wife, now a widow for the second time, with a beautiful home, and ample fortune, writes affectionate entreaties to me to cross the ocean and visit her, and receive the welcome due to the friend to whom she owes everything. Clara Warren, grown up a beautiful and accomplished woman, and richly dowered by the kind though rough old man who lavished princely sums on the education and establishment of his step-children, is the wife of a man of wealth and position in the north of England, happy almost beyond description, and not behind her mother in eager desire to admit that she owes her happiness to me. Bertram Warren is fast rising to high place and universal esteem in his adopted country. These three prosperous, happy lives in the present—who shall say how many in the future ?—with their

brightness undimmed by the shadow of a crime, are my reward for an act of deliberate perjury.

Did I commit a great sin when, in the witness box, on that eventful day, I solemnly swore to the truth of a baseless fabrication? Let whomsoever chooses decide that question for himself. It has never troubled my peace, and I have never sought to solve it. All that I know is that I have never for one moment repented what I did. For the rest, I stand at Cæsar's judgment seat, and await with fearless trust the righteous sentence from which there is no appeal.

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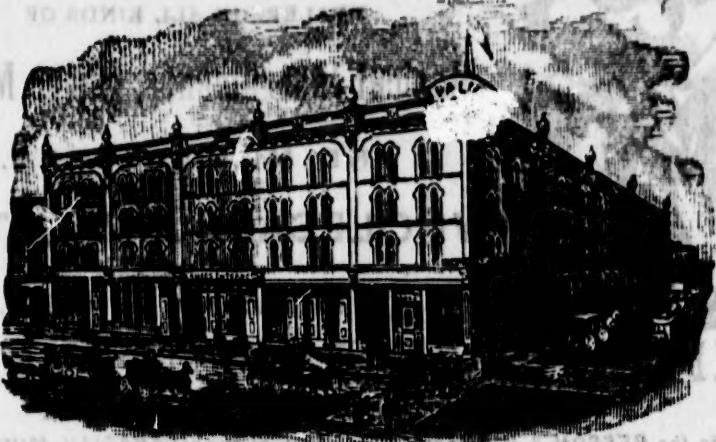
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